FEB. 3

10¢

Exciting New Serial of Arctic Adventure by
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 2-3

WEEKLY

Take to the Pampas, Rogues Here Comes an Irish Cop on the Rampage!

SEÑOR FLATFOOT

by **Cornell Woolrich**

C. K. Shaw
E. Hoffman Price
and Other Fiction Stars

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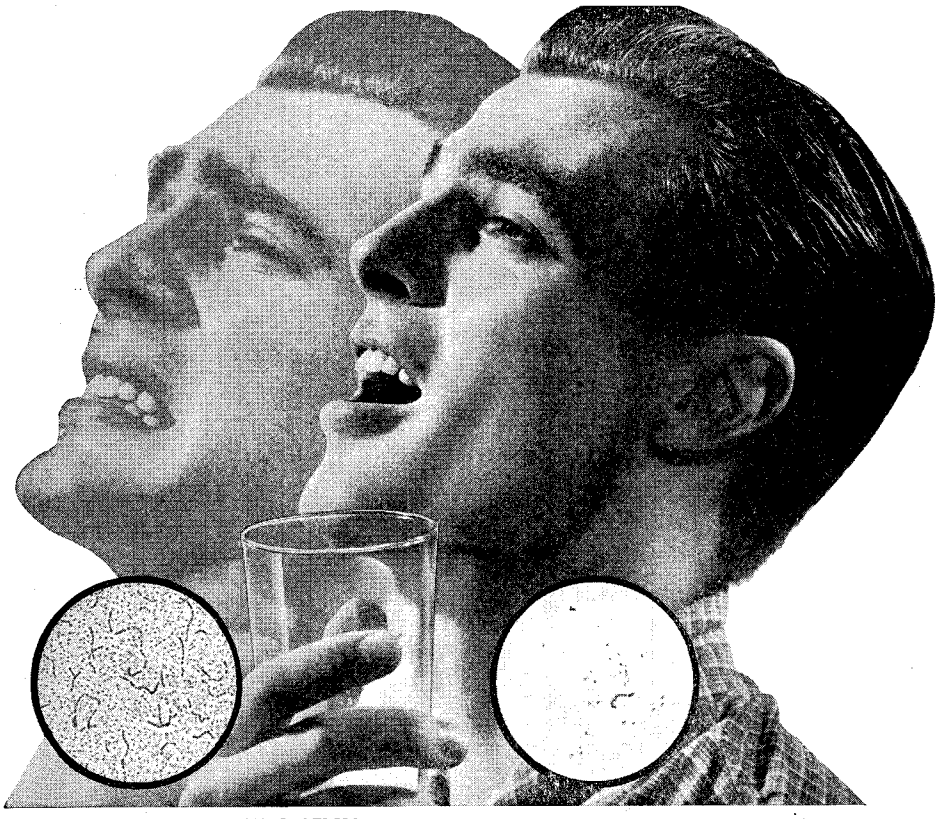

NOTE HOW LISTERINE REDUCED GERMS: The two drawings above illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

AT THE FIRST SYMPTOM OF A COLD OR SORE THROAT—

Listerine quick!

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on the throat surfaces to kill "secondary invaders" . . . the very types of germs that make a cold more troublesome.

This prompt and frequent use of full strength Listerine Antiseptic may keep a cold from getting serious, or head it off entirely... at the same time relieving throat irritation when due to a cold.

This is the experience of countless people and it is backed up by some of the sanest, most impressive research work ever attempted in connection with cold prevention and relief.

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Actual tests conducted on all types of people in several industrial plants over 8 years revealed this astonishing truth: That those who gargled Listerine Antiseptic twice daily had fewer colds and milder colds than non-users, and fewer sore throats.

This impressive record is explained by Listerine Antiseptic's germ-killing action . . . its ability to kill threatening "secondary invaders" — the very types of germs that breed in the mouth and throat and are largely responsible, many authorities say, for the bothersome aspects of a cold.

Germ Reductions Up to 96.7%

Even 15 minutes after Listerine Antiseptic gargle, tests have shown bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7%. Up to 80% an hour afterward.

In view of this evidence, don't you think it's a sensible precaution against colds to gargle with Listerine Antiseptic systematically twice a day and oftener when you feel a cold getting started?

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, Mo.*

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IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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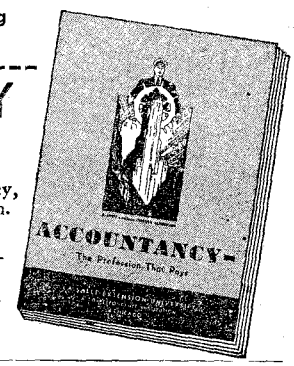

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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Illustrating Señor Flatfoot

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

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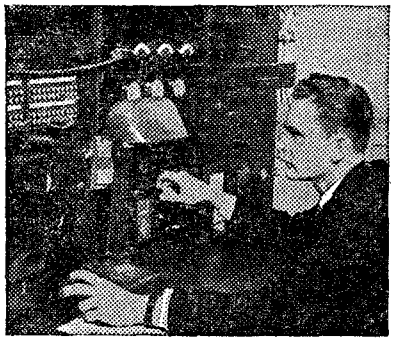

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Act today. Mail the coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my Course in Radio and Television; show letters from men I have trained telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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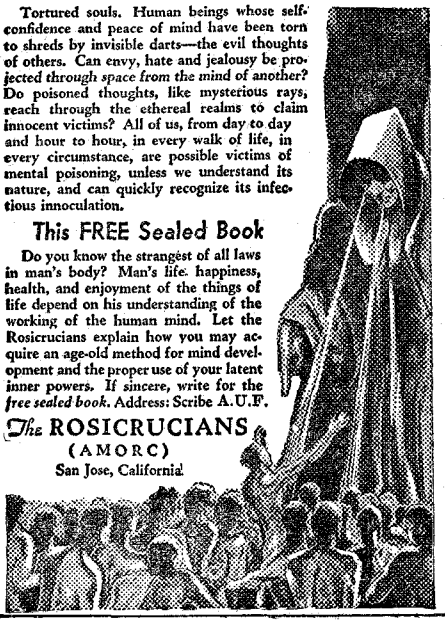

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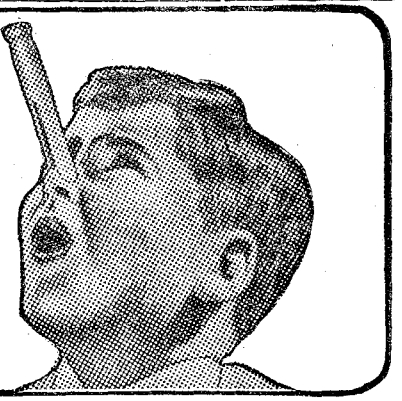

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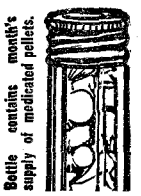
60-SECOND Demonstration

Asthma-Catarrh



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CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 28, Bloomfield, New Jersey.

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The White Oomailik

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE
Author of "Christmas on Ice," "Tin Money," etc.

It's an enemy world up North, with the wind always singing across the ice; and only a man like Tim Banning could brave hundreds of miles of white silence to reach the stranded whalers—whom he would have to conquer to rescue

CHAPTER I

THE BANNINGS OF MAINE

TIM BANNING, first lieutenant, United States Revenue Cutter Service, stepped from the train, buttoned his great-coat against the raw November air, then hailed a hack waiting in the rear of the depot. "Drive me to Captain Phineas Banning's home," he directed, "and see if you can get a couple of extra knots out of those plugs."

The driver grinned. "Tim Banning!" he exclaimed. "So you've come home to visit your precious uncle."

The note of sarcasm in the driver's voice did not escape Tim. "None of your remarks, Mike," he said. "Say, what's in the wind, anyway. The old devil—er my uncle—telegraphed me to get a leave of absence and report home immediately. I suppose he wants to blow me up about something."

"Like as not," the driver agreed, "and I'm warnin' you, lad, old Sulphur-bottom ain't changed since he told you to get out of his sight five years ago. But hark to this, the old shellback has kept track of your advancement in the Revenue Service."

"The man don't live who really knows what's going on in Uncle Phineas' mind," Tim said grimly. "As for the family—confound him he treats the lot of us as if we were fo'c'sle hands on one of his whalers. You'd think we lived in the Dark Ages instead of the enlightened year eighteen hundred and ninety-seven."

"You mean he treats 'em like swabs 'cept you, Tim," the old driver slyly observed.

Tim sat back and watched scenes familiar since his boyhood move slowly past the cab. Bannings might, and did, roam the seven seas and all the oceans, but the hardest of them felt the tug of the snug, sleepy little Maine port they called home. Invariably they returned to live awhile off their savings before they died.

Tim Banning's superb body was a part of his heritage from generations of sailing men. He stood five feet, ten inches, weighed a hundred and eighty pounds and was broad-shouldered and deep-chested. The Bannings were not handsome men; they were granite men who courted furiously and married beautiful women. There were times when they fought bitterly among themselves; but to the world the Maine Bannings presented a solid, united front.

The pride of family surged strongly within Tim as he saw the substantial houses lining the street and caught the smells of exposed tide flats, fish, pitch and tar. He paid Mike, then paused a moment before the sagging gate and the path worn deep by countless seaboots.

The door opened and a mighty voice roared, "You spineless swab, what're you afraid of? Come here! Lively!" There was no mistaking the note of command. And though Tim hated himself for it, he leaped to obey.

AS TIM stepped onto the porch, Phineas Banning turned his back and led the way into the parlor. He turned, clasped his hands behind his back and

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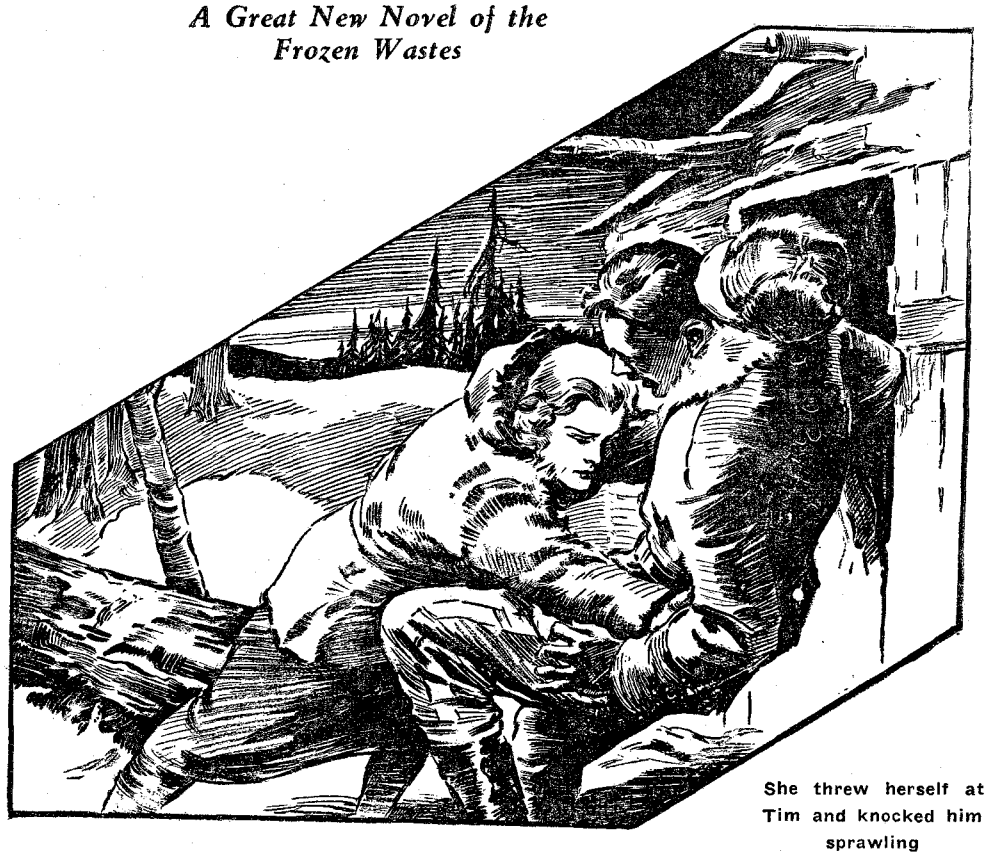
A Great New Novel of the Frozen Wastes



She threw herself at Tim and knocked him sprawling

warmed them before the wood fire burning in the open fireplace. Then he glared, and thumped the floor with his wooden leg. "I tried to make a man out of you in my whalin' fleet. It couldn't be done."

"The year I was mate on the *Audacious* she got more oil and bone than—" Tim began defensively.

"Shut up!" Sulphur-bottom Banning roared. "Damned sea-lawyer," he muttered. "If you'd stayed on her another season they'd have called you the Silk-glove Mate. I fired you and—"

"Like hell you fired me," Tim retorted. "I told you what you could do with your job, then hopped into the Revenue Service as a second lieutenant and was detailed to the Arctic patrol."

The old whaler glared at his nephew's impudence. "Back-talkin' to me on my own poop! Take off your coat! Turn around! You ain't got the chest I had at twenty-five. Ain't got the arm stren'th, either.

"Banning strain's dyin' out. I could see it comin' when your father died. Buried at sea at seventy-five years he was—and the best of his life ahead of him. And now you . . ." He snorted his contempt.

"Damn it!" Tim exploded. "You telegraphed me to come, and I caught the first train out of Boston, believing it was important. After five years silence you begin right where you left off."

"Soft bunks, fancy vittles and pain-killers like this here chloroform is ruinin' the human race," the older whaler continued. "When my right leg was crushed and had to be cut off, who done it? The ship's carpenter. And I set, lashed in a

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chair, and told him how. Imagine you . . ." He snorted in his disgust and spat into the fire.

"Things hadn't changed much the last time I was in the Arctic," Tim observed. "But I'm not going to saw off a leg just to find out whether the present generation can endure pain or not. All right, old Sulphur-bottom," he added with a note of finality in his voice. "It's been nice to have seen you again; you hate the world and yourself as much as ever." He started for the door.

"Set down!" Old Sulphur-bottom Banning roared. "I want you to read my will."

"Huh? Your will. So you're getting scared and putting your affairs in order," Tim observed in a tone calculated to bring on another violent outburst of anger.

"I'm eighty, and I'll live to bury the last of the Bannings," the old whaler wrathfully declared.

Tim read a paragraph scrawled in his bold handwriting, "And to my nephew Tim Banning I give and bequeath my entire fleet of Arctice whalers, the *Audacious, Pearl, Wanderer, Bangor, Elsie,* and *Aleutian* . . ." Tim paused. "He writes like he was hurling a harpoon," he mused, "but he makes himself plain. Now what's the catch? This will is dated the day I told him what he could do with his job.

"Well?" Old Sulphur-bottom snorted. "Haven't you learned to read yet?"

"Yes. Five years ago you made me your heir," Tim answered. "I suppose you've called me so you can have the pleasure of tearing up the will in my presence."

"Wrong as usual," the old man sourly retorted. "I'm givin' you the *Audacious, Aleutian* and *Wanderer*. Here's the papers, all made out. Cephas Whitman, the Banning lawyer, just left. You take 'em, as is and where is, for the sum of one hundred dollars."

"What's the trick? Has somebody libeled them? Or has the insurance lapsed?" Tim asked.

"Ain't insured," the old whaler answered. "Cost too much for the premiums. You know that. Or don't you? You don't seem to have the sense God gave geese. Every ship in my fleet is free and clear and all bills paid."

TIM sat down and wrote a check for a hundred dollars. He handed it to his uncle and then leaned back in the chair to study the grizzled features. Old Sulphur-bottom Banning's face betrayed nothing. "I suppose I'd better write my resignation to the Secretary of Treasury," he suggested.

"I ain't fool enough to offer you advice," Banning said. "You young swabs know it all. Or you think you do."

Tim stood up. "I might as well file these papers and get off my resignation," he said, "then I'll be free to visit."

"It's been my experience runnin' a whalin' fleet don't leave much time for kitin' around like an old woman," Banning observed. "Wait! There's one rule the Bannings have followed as masters and owners for a hundred and fifty years —the Bannings look after their people. Whether it be a sick master or cabin boy stranded on a desert island—*the Bannings look after their people.*"

"And the officers and crews of the *Audacious, Aleutian* and *Wanderer* are now my people," Tim said. "All right! That's one family tradition I'll perserve."

He picked up the papers and put them in his coat pocket, then he pulled on his overcoat. "I think I'll walk downtown," he said, "and stretch my legs."

Progress was slow. Old Mike had informed the town Tim Banning had returned and people hailed him from doorways and side streets. His three years in the Arctic on the Revenue Cutter *Aurora* had been frequently discussed and certain adventures had been mentioned in the local weekly newspaper. The last two years he had served aboard the *Otter* on the Atlantic, but the cutter had never anchored in Tim's home waters.

But for his uncle's unexpected summons another year or two might well have passed without his visiting home. He stopped at

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the telegraph office and sent his resignation to Washington. The local editor stopped him and asked about his visit; then he went on to the court house and filed the papers which made him the sole owner of three whalers.

Ownership of the *Audacious* brought Tim a special and deep pride. She was easily the finest and newest of the lot. Aboard the *Audacious,* on her maiden cruise, Tim had learned the fundamentals of whaling under grim old Sulphur-bottom Banning himself. Promotion had been slow, but at eighteen he was third mate; and at twenty, when his uncle retired, he was first mate. It was that season the whaler discharged a record load of oil and bone at San Francisco.

It was that season, too, his uncle had discharged him without warning, but with three months pay. No one knew the reason. Some said Phineas Banning wanted Tim to shift for himself awhile; others claimed it was because the old man had attempted to blow Tim up while the *Audacious* was discharging at San Francisco and Tim had talked back. A third school held to the belief that Tim was unfortunate enough to cross his uncle's bows at a time when his corns hurt him.

"He gave me the *Audacious,*" Tim reflected after a half hour's talk with the editor, "and that proves he's not quite so disgusted with me as he claims."

He dropped into a saloon where whalers congregated and drank and smoked with old shipmates. Gradually a sense of security and well-being stole over Tim Banning. He was thinking of going home when a gust of wind blew the telegraph operator into the saloon.

"Sign here, Tim," he said in the manner of one bearing portentous news. Then he leaned against the bar to enjoy the effect the message might have.

Tim read:

TREASURY DEPARTMENT,
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

SIR: YOU ARE ADVISED YOUR RESIGNATION IS REFUSED. PEOPLE OF SAN FRANCISCO HAVE ADVISED THAT THE WHALING FLEET IS CAUGHT IN THE ARCTIC ICE. THE *WANDERER, ALEUTIAN* AND *AUDACIOUS* HAVE BEEN ABANDONED BY THEIR CREWS AND OTHER VESSELS ARE IN PERIL. IT IS PLANNED TO SEND A RELIEF EXPEDITION TO AVERT SICKNESS AND STARVATION. YOU WILL IMMEDIATELY REPORT TO THE REVENUE CUTTER *AURORA* AT SEATTLE FOR ORDERS.

SECRETARY

FIRST LIEUT. TIM BANNING

Tim's face betrayed nothing as he folded the telegram and placed it in his pocket. He joined the telegraph operator at the bar. "You gave my uncle a telegram several days ago, didn't you?" he said in a tone that suggested he knew all details.

"Yes, but it was in code and I couldn't make head or tail of it," the operator told him. "But old Sulphur-bottom read it and put a message on the wire for you to come a-running." He nodded toward Tim's pocket. "Too bad about all those whalers," he said in a low voice.

Tim did not answer. His uncle's words came back to him, "The Bannings look after their people." He caught his breath sharply. "He knew it all the time," he muttered, "and that's why he gave those ships to me. The old—" He choked back the remainder, remembering the Bannings never aired their linen publicly.

"Bad news, Tim?" an old shellback asked.

"No," Tim answered. "Sailing orders."

CHAPTER II

THE BIG FREEZE

TIM hailed Mike and gave him a dollar. "Sailing orders, Mike," he said. "Drive out to the house, pick up my bag, and bring it down to the depot. A train leaves in ten minutes and I'll be aboard it —bag or no bag. And listen, tell old Sulphur-bottom I send love and kisses. That'll give him something to snort about."

"I wouldn't think of it," Mike protested in an awed voice. "In moments of rage he's been known to pull off his wooden leg and bash people over the head with it. I'll tell him you're called away sudden."

Mike jumped aboard his hack and stirred his ancient steeds into a gallop. He was back in eight minutes and handed Tim his

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bag. "Maybe you'd better not go, Tim," he said doubtfully. "I think he's had a spell of some kind—he was laughin' fit to kill."

"And the Bannings look after their people," Tim groaned. He swung aboard the train and stood on the steps as it pulled out. "Hail and farewell!" he said.

He had the porter make up his berth then turned in to do a little serious thinking. "Old Sulphur-bottom moved swiftly, as usual," Tim reflected. "Someone in San Francisco telegraphed him the whalers were lost and for his own, devilish reasons he unloaded the lost vessels on me. And I paid him a hundred dollars!"

Tim reasoned that the *Pearl, Bangor,* and *Elsie* were safe, or those vessels would have been included in his uncle's gift. The *Bangor,* like the *Audacious* was a three-masted steam bark. The *Pearl* and *Elsie* were older, but good for many years of battling the ice if they survived the winter.

He dressed about eight o'clock and went to the diner. A girl of twenty lifted her eyes with studied casualness from the menu, then adroitly assumed surprise and pleasure. "Why Tim!" she exclaimed. "How wonderful to meet you!"

"Well! Well!" he answered. "The last time we met you slapped my face and told me I was no gentleman. May I join you?"

"Of course."

He sat down and studied the girl a moment in silence. "Little Mary Ridley grown up," he said slowly. "Now as I remember you—"

"Please don't remember me," she protested. "Skinny legs; braids of taffy colored hair straight down the back; a turned-up nose and . . ."

"Time works miracles," he said, and meant it. The taffy colored hair was now a lovely blond; her black eyes were striking in contrast to her hair and coloring. The nose was entirely satisfactory. As to legs—well a glimpse might be possible in a gale of wind.

"You heard the whaling fleet is caught in the ice?" he asked Mary suddenly.

She hesitated. "Yes," she said, as if weighing the admission. "But we don't know whether any of the Ridley fleet is lost or not."

"We lost three," he said, "which should be good news to our bitter rivals, the Ridleys."

"Have we a quarrel?" she asked.

"Mary Ridley and Tim Banning have none that I know of," he replied. "But there's no love lost between your father and my uncle."

SHE ate thoughtfully for several minutes. "If the entire fleet is lost," she ventured, "it will be pretty terrible. Three hundred men in the Arctic with little shelter and only the provisions that can be salvaged. Sometimes a crushed vessel goes down fast. Sometimes the ice is so rough that it's impossible to get more than a few pounds of provisions ashore."

"You know the Arctic," he observed. He recalled it was generally admitted around home that the Ridley's Mary should have been a boy. Certainly she had a greater capacity for hard work and a far larger share of what New England called horse sense than her brother, Bill.

"Has your hurried trip West any significance?" she asked.

"Yes, the *Aurora* has been ordered to provision immediately and sail North," Tim answered. "My leave was canceled and I have orders to report aboard. I don't know what the captain's plans are. It's certain the ice extends far south of Bering Straits. I doubt if we could steam as far as Cape Nome. Whatever food is sent must go overland."

"There aren't men enough in the North to freight sufficient provisions overland to the Arctic," the girl protested. "Can't the shipwrecked people be brought out, overland?"

"They aren't dressed for it," Tim replied. "No, food must be taken to them. And the answer is reindeer."

"Reindeer?"

"Yes," he said. "They're hardy, accus-

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tomed to the cold and capable of living off the country part of the time. Oh, I know it sounds like a wild scheme, with the odds all against success, but it's the only thing that offers even a slim chance. Others have probably thought of it. We certainly can't back-pack food hundreds of miles in the dead of winter."

"The Klondike gold excitement has drained Alaska of dogs," she added gloomily. "Even if dogs were available, they couldn't eat moss, and you'd have to carry as much dog food as you did freight."

"Which brings us back to reindeer," he said. "And ice conditions are such that we may not even get into the Bering Sea. If that's the case, hundreds of miles will be added to an overland expedition. By the way, what brings you West?"

"I'm visiting friends in Victoria, British Columbia," she answered. Their glances clashed briefly. "Why did you ask?"

"Ever since I can remember," Tim said slowly, "Mary Ridley has been known as an impulsive little fool."

"An impulsive little fool measured by the standards of a little seaport in Maine," she said.

"Well, that's your reputation," Tim continued doggedly, "and I thought you might have decided to hurry North and look after the Ridley interests."

"My brother Bill is looking after the Ridley interests up North," she informed him.

Tim knew Bill Ridley by sight. He was a big man, as big as Tim, and except for the weakness of his mouth, he was handsome. His hair was blond and his eyes black, like Mary's.

Bill had inherited his father's crafty intelligence, and like his father he was driven by a passion for money and the power it bought. But Bill Ridley had already won a dubious sort of fame up North by his capacity for hard liquor; and in a land where every nickname has a peculiar significance he was known as Squaw Ridley. He was Tim's age, twenty-five. And he knew whaling from harpoon to corset stave. He was a fighter too.

"If Bill's on the job," Tim said, "the Ridley interests should be in good hands."

The two saw much of each other on the way across the continent and Tim detected an eagerness, mixed with impatience, in the girl's manner which set him to thinking.

"I'll see you safely to the Victoria steamer," he offered when they arrived in Seattle.

"That'll be lovely," she answered. "I can hardly wait to see my friends. One of the girls was my roommate at school."

Tim nodded. "Is there any message you want sent to Bill?" he asked. "I suppose the expedition will take a limited amount of first-class mail North."

"I'll mail you a letter to him from Victoria," she replied. "I suppose the *Aurora* will be delayed several days, loading."

TIM saw her aboard the steamer and then hurried on to the *Aurora*. Smoke trailed lazily from her stack, drifting through the rigging, and around the lofty crow's nest. The foremast yards carried sail drying out after the night's drenching rain. The scum and flotsam of the harbor drifted about her sturdy bows. She seemed relaxed, as if resting for the hard voyage ahead.

Sling-loads of stores were going into her holds under an officer's watchful eye. Nothing was being left to chance. Tim went over the side and shook hands with the deck officer, an old friend. "The Old Man's below," the officer said, "He's expecting you. Too bad your uncle lost half of his fleet."

"Uncle . . . hell!" Tim exploded. "The old fox deeded those ships to me after they went down. I paid a hundred dollars of my hard-earned money for 'em. I'm telling it, because I know he will."

'Why the old son of a sea cook," the officer exclaimed.

"Your description is conservative," Tim retorted.

He reported, and Captain Ross shook hands. "You understand, of course, Ban-

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ning," he explained, "this is volunteer duty. The Revenue Service isn't ordering any man on so dangerous a mission."

"You must have guessed I'd volunteer or you wouldn't have requested I be transferred to the *Aurora,*" Tim answered.

"I know you fairly well, Banning," Ross drawled, with a faint smile. "And I know if any man can get through to the Arctic you can. It's going to be a tough job, but the situation is so serious that any risk is justified."

"Do I understand you are detailing me to command the proposed overland expedition?" Tim asked.

"Exactly," Ross answered. "Your orders are: get food to the starving men in the most feasible manner. You will have full authority to requisition supplies and to take any measures you think necessary for the common good at all times. The Treasury Department is backing me to the limit. And I am backing you."

"We both know what happens when men starve," Tim said. "A few weeks of hunger will send them back thousands of years sometimes; they live by the law of the pack, the law of survival."

"If the starving men know assistance is coming, it will bolster up their morale," Ross continued. "The sooner they are informed the better. Your problem is to see that they survive until late July or August. Mine is to get through the ice next summer and bring out the wrecked people you have saved from death. It is the biggest thing the Revenue Service has ever attempted." He stared hard at Tim. "And the Service will be satisfied with nothing less than success."

Tim nodded. "That's the way I feel about it."

"How do you expect to transport food for three hundred men over hundreds of miles of frozen wastes in the dead of winter?" Ross asked bluntly.

"Reindeer!"

"That's the only possible answer," Ross agreed. "The Revenue Service agrees to that. Now your job is to make an inventory of your needs and see that they are aboard. There's one more thing . . ." Ross hesitated and a significant glance passed between them.

"I understand, sir," Tim said. "My uncle's fleet is involved and there's a personal angle to the situation. Let me assure you that I'll be representing the Government when I arrive. I know that if I don't remain strictly impersonal toward the job, I'll lose my authority and the general situation will get out of hand. Besides, sir, my beloved uncle gave me the three ships of his that were caught and crushed."

"The devil he did! Well, that's like him. But the ice plays strange pranks. And there's a chance that the *Audacious,* at least, with her hull constructed particularly for ice conditions, may survive," Ross said slowly. "In that case, Banning—"

"I'd still have to hew to the line, sir," Tim said. "I hope you believe me."

"I've never had the slightest doubt, Banning," Ross assured him. "But for your own protection, should unforeseen difficulties arise, it is important that your views be on record at headquarters in Washington. That's all."

"CAST off!" The order rang out sharply, mooring lines dropped in the water and Revenue Service sailors hauled them aboard the *Aurora.* She backed slowly into the stream, turned and headed north. Alki Point and Seattle dropped astern.

The decks were loaded with salt provisions in barrels; the forward coal bunker was jammed with dry provisions, which the *Aurora* would deliver to the stranded whalers eight months in the future. She steamed past Port Townsend, past the forest of masts of waiting windjammers.

The lighthouse dipped its flag and Tim Banning, first lieutenant, Revenue Cutter Service, heaved a sigh and wondered what would have happened to him when he again saw that dipping flag. In his pocket he carried a letter to Squaw Ridley in Mary's neat handwriting. If Ridley were

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looking after the family's whaling interests, then Tim expected to meet the man somewhere around Point Barrow.

The *Aurora* passed Cape Flattery and smothered her bows in a gale roaring down from the north. "It looks as if the elements were getting together right now," Tim observed, "to beat us."

Captain Ross nodded in assent. "At this season of the year the elements never let up on man venturing into the North Pacific and Bering Sea," he answered. "I've made arrangements with the Alaska Commercial Company to store the dry provisions at Unalaska until we need them next summer. As soon as they are unloaded we'll coal at Dutch Harbor. After that . . . well, I'd like to beat the ice and land you somewhere on the North shore of Norton Sound."

CHAPTER III

TIM OOMAILIK, ESQ.

THE imaginary line of longitude 166° West cuts through the Aleutian Islands just east of Unalaska, then runs north, intersecting three great peninsulas jutting into the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean like the stubs of amputated fingers.

South of the first stub lies Bristol Bay; north of it is Norton Sound, washing also against the southerly shore of the second stub, Cape Prince of Wales at 168° West longitude. Here America and the Siberian mainland form Bering Strait. North of that is the Arctic Ocean. Kotzebue Sound breaks in between the second and third stubs, extending east almost to 160° West longitude.

Point Hope is on the third stub and from that point the mainland retreats northeasterly to Point Barrow which is west of 156° West longitude. From Barrow the mainland runs, roughly, east.

Tim kept the picture in mind as the *Aurora* bucked the wind and ice scum in Bering Sea. If conditions forced a landing on the first stub it meant lost time while he followed the shore line of Norton Sound to Cape Prince of Wales, the location of the reindeer herd. Another detour would be necessary unless he crossed Kotzebue Sound over the ice.

"There's something to think about," he mused. "Driving reindeer over the ice. But I'll worry about that problem when I get to it."

He went on deck and scowled at the swirling snow. "The Old Man had laid a course near enough to Nunavack Island to sight it," a fellow officer said, "but early this morning he changed his course to leave it well to the eastward. Damn this thick weather."

The foghorn moaned dismally. The snow whipped about the *Aurora* like a shroud. "What was that, an echo?" Ross roared. "Hard over!"

"Hard over!" the helmsman repated. A bell clanged ominously in the engine-room.

"It must have been an echo!" Tim whispered. "There isn't another ship in the Bering Sea this time of the year."

"If that's an echo," a second lieutenant said in guarded tones, "we're way off our course."

The whistle blasted again. The answer came two points off the starboard bow. "There is another steamer up here!" the skipper exclaimed. "What do you make of it, Mr. Banning?"

Tim joined the master on the bridge. "It can't be possible a whaler escaped, got around Barrow and is fighting its way south?"

Signals passed quickly, and when the flurry of snow passed on they saw a ghost craft moving in the twilight. It dipped its flag and dissolved into the snow to the southeast. "That's Ridley's new whaler, the *Nora!*" Captain Ross exclaimed. "I thought she was tied up at Victoria, waiting for summer and her maiden cruise."

"Shakedown cruise, sir," a second lieutenant suggested.

"They don't need to risk Bering Sea in December for a shakedown cruise," Ross suggested. "I don't understand it."

"The *Nora* hadn't any desire to speak

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us," Tim said. He was thinking of Mary Ridley's eagerness to reach Victoria, and the strange coincidence that sent them west on the same train.

"None in the world," Ross agreed. "And that's unusual. She might have reported ice conditions. If I can't make it through to Norton Sound, the sooner I know it the better."

"Mary Ridley came west on the same train," Tim said presently. "She said she was visiting a college roommate in Victoria. This roommate's name might have been Nora. And *Nora* might have landed Mary on the shores of Norton Sound, sir. There was ample time while we were outfitting. The *Nora* could have coaled and provisioned for a Bering Sea dash while Mary was crossing the continent."

"What reason would she have for going north in the dead of winter?" Ross asked.

Tim shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but if I should find myself with a girl on my hands it will slow me up and complicate the situation."

"Mr. Banning," Ross said sharply, "whenever you find yourself you'll be in absolute command. You have authority to use force, if necessary, to carry out your orders. See to it that you don't find yourself in a remote region with a woman on your hands. If need be, lock her up. This is no time for any of the Ridleys' well known trickery. And that, sir, is an order."

"Yes, sir," Tim answered smartly. But he wondered what he would do if he encountered Mary on the trail, frozen or starving. On the theory that his duty was to care for the greatest number, he would have to leave her to freeze and starve. He took a turn back and forth and a couple of deep drafts on his pipe. This expedition seemed to promise every variety of disaster.

EARLY the following morning it became increasingly evident that the *Nora* was fleeing before the ice. Perhaps the whaler had failed to land Mary Ridley, if indeed that had been her mission.

Captain Ross and Tim Banning formed a tense pair on the *Aurora's* bridge. The cutter's bows pounded through drift ice, mixed with slush ice. Only a stiff breeze which kept the ice in motion prevented the floes from freezing into a solid mass.

"It's getting too heavy, Mr. Banning," Ross growled. "We'll change our course and wait for what twilight brings."

The *Aurora's* engine turned over at half speed and she tacked back and forth under a reefed mainsail, jib and staysail.

Twilight in mid morning revealed that mush ice south of the cutter was thicker. From the north came the grind of the pack. Tim watched the skipper's weathered, worried face. The cutter was experiencing difficulty in pushing through the slush ice now. Tim's interest shifted to the wind. It was beginning to slacken. The *Aurora* was in danger of being caught and the purpose of the expedition defeated at the start.

Ross checked on the chart and shook his head dubiously. "Cape Nome's nearly a hundred miles," he said to Tim. "Sledge Island's farther. With every chance the recent gales have piled ice up so far off shore we couldn't land you, anyway."

"That's true," Tim agreed. He voiced no regret, knowing Ross was as deeply disappointed as himself. But it meant skirting Norton Sound on foot.

"And unless we move swiftly," Ross continued, "the ice may defeat us again and we'll be required to drop back to Bristol Bay. It may even force us to return to the Pacific and make a landing on the Alaska Peninsula."

The *Aurora* changed her course and drove toward Cape Vancouver with the ice grinding away under her bows. Cape Nome was within striking distance of the reindeer herd at Cape Prince of Wales, but the strength of the pack had convinced Tim he could call himself lucky if he were put ashore anywhere north of Bristol Bay.

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"The Old Man's shaking out more sail," Tim said with satisfaction, "and the engine's turning over full speed." He watched the ice grinding alongside. The ship slowed as the ice legions took hold; then the wind above and the machinery below broke the grasp and she moved ahead. It was anybody's fight as night dragged on. Whenever there was a break in the ice, the leadsman took soundings.

Around six o'clock in the morning, the engine's sturdy throbbing ceased. Tim rolled from his bunk and went on deck. "The charts show ten fathoms of water," Ross growled, "but there's less than five."

The anchor dropped and Tim went forward to look at the ice. The field was moving rapidly and the weather gave promise of a gale. He went back to a boat lashed amidships which the ship's carpenter had built coming up under his instructions. It was little more than a frame covered with heavy canvas and given several coats of paint to waterproof it.

It was the nearest Tim could get to the native umiak, or skin boat, which can push through ice that would shatter a rigid wooden boat. Being lightly constructed, it could be carried over bad stretches of ice, then launched in leads. Given any kind of a chance, such a craft could make shore.

Tim returned to the bridge. "May I talk right out, sir?" he asked.

"Go ahead, Mr. Banning," the skipper answered.

"The ice is running fast. If it comes in a solid pack the anchor chain will part or we'll have to pull up the anchor and clear out. I'd like to be set adrift in that canvas boat, sir, and take my chances," he said. "I can get over the ice some way. There's a native village in the vicinity of Cape Vancouver. There I can get guides to St. Michael. I know Surgeon Newton feels the same way about it."

"The safety of the whalers is our first consideration, Mr. Banning," Ross reminded him. "I couldn't risk being caught in the ice in a drive to Cape Nome. I can't risk your life in a hundred-to-one chance of getting through running ice. You're too valuable a man."

Tim returned and stared gloomily at the ice. He knew it was getting thicker and presently the anchor began to drag. "The Old Man's between the devil and the deep sea," he said to Surgeon Newton. "He's only one guess and it must be the right one."

WIND whistled through the rigging and it carried the chill of the Arctic. It had stopped snowing and there was a break in the clouds revealing cold Arctic stars. "This may be our last comfortable night in months," Newton observed, "and we're not making the most of it."

"Light ho!" the lookout suddenly bellowed. His tone conveyed his excitement. "Three points off the starboard bow. It's gone," he added. "But I know it was a light."

Tim fairly flew up the shrouds to the crow's nest. He stared intently and made out a vague yellow square in the distance. "Is that it?" he asked.

The lookout blinked, stared, then blinked again. "Yeah, it was about there. Now it's gone."

Tim reported to the skipper. "It's a village," he said.

The *Aurora* dragged her anchors until twilight revealed a bleak cape and a sea of running ice. The anchors were hauled up and under a full head of steam the cutter pushed ahead. The canvas boat was swung over the side and secured level with the ship's rail. The leadsman tolled off the fathoms in a monotonous voice.

"A lead dead ahead, sir," the lookout bellowed.

"That'll help!" Tim said. He was standing on deck, dressed in fur clothing and Eskimo mukluks or skin boots. He wore a reindeer skin parka. The hood was faced with wolverine fur which dissipates the frost and prevents the moisture of the breath from gathering and freezing parka hood to the wearer's face.

Surgeon Newton was similiarly dressed. The leadsman called a sudden warning.

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"Shoal water," Newton groaned. "Just when it looked as if we had a chance."

The cutter pushed ahead to the lead and dropped anchor. Captain Ross hid his concern over shoal water and threatening ice. "Goodbye, Mr. Banning," he said, shaking Tim's hand warmly. "And good luck. I'll see you at Barrow in August. Again, good luck—*Oomailik.*"

Tim understood the reference. *Oomailik* was the native word for one in authority. They believed the revenue cutter was sent North each summer by some great white *oomailik.*

"I'll have to be an *oomailik* if I expect to get what I need along the way," Tim answered. He shook hands with the others, then went over the side to the waiting boat. It was filled with supplies, a dog sled, dogs and a crew.

Surgeon Newton followed and slipped into a hole in the stern. The *Aurora* loomed high and friendly for a moment—offering warmth, food and security; promising care in sickness. Ahead lay the grim Northland with its eternal challenge waiting to hurl them back broken and beaten.

"Shove off!" Tim ordered sharply. "Give way together." He grasped the tiller handle, instinctively picking the best of the narrow channels through the ice.

The dogs whimpered and trembled with cold and excitement, eager to feel the solid ground under their feet. Tim stood up and gazed at the shore two miles away. It was moving so rapidly northward that natives on the beach trotted steadily to keep abreast of the boat.

"Damn it!" Surgeon Newton exploded, "the lead's closing. Shut your ears, and eyes, Tim, or we may hear or see a recall signal."

"It's too late now," Tim answered. "The lead has closed in behind us. We're prisoners of the floes."

The two men in the bow stood up and pushed back the drifting slabs with their oars. The others dug their oars into floating cakes and drove the light craft in deeper. Floating ice and shore ice came together with a grind and crash. Small pressure ridges leaped up and fell back, lacking the depth and volume to remain rigid.

"Lively now, men," Tim ordered as he went over the side. "Hand out the equipment and stores. The dogs first, they won't go far." The five dogs bounded ashore. A sailor thrust the sled over the rail and Tim yanked it to the ice. Equipment followed as fast as Tim and Newton could receive it. The mail pouch came last and landed with the rest.

Then the boat's crew jumped out, lifted the craft bodily and began lugging it toward open water. A half dozen natives worked their way through the broken ice and stared, their faces betraying their astonishment over the unseasonable visit. More cheechakos, or newcomers, seeking gold, no doubt. Strange people, these whites.

Tim fired something at them in dialect and one of them responded. He turned and spoke to the others. One lifted the sled and started toward the beach; the others made the outfit into small packs and followed. Tim put the remainder of the supplies in a safe place, then tossed the mail pouch over his shoulder.

Surgeon Newton was already picking his way through the shattered blocks. The *Aurora* had put about and was driving through the ice toward the canvas boat. Plumes of steam fluttered from her whistle and the familiar blast rang in Tim's ears long after the final echo died.

CHAPTER IV

THE DAYS TO COME

THEY made three trips over the ice and brought out the last precious pound of stores, then caught the dogs and harnessed them to the sled. The natives led the way to their village and Tim got in touch with the trader. "Did a whaler land anyone here within the past week?" he asked. "A girl?"

"No," he answered, to Tim's relief. "But week ago, ship could go through ice to Cape Nome. Maybe there?"

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"I hope not," Tim said with feeling. "I'm going to need dogs, guides and provisions." Briefly he explained the purposes of the expedition and displayed his credentials. The trader shook his head. Tim resolved he might as well accustom himself to dubious head shakings right now. "Get me to St. Michael," he said, "and I'll organize there."

He decided to take the lightest sled and fastest dogs and push ahead, leaving Newton to follow. There was every prospect that someone had arrived there from Barrow with late information. He spread out a chart and called Surgeon Newton. "The *Aurora's* done her part," Tim said, "and we find solid Alaskan soil under our feet. True, it has a liberal coating of ice and slow. Still, it's soil."

"St. Michael is the first goal, I suppose," Newton remarked.

"Yes. A young guide has promised to take me there. You are to follow with the heavier outfit," Tim explained. "You'll cross the base of Seward Peninsula from Norton to Kotzebue Sound. While you're doing that I'll push west on the peninsula to the deer at Cape Prince of Wales."

"And there face a little matter of driving reindeer around a thousand miles if you follow the meanderings of the shoreline of the sound," Newton added.

"It can be cut to around seven hundred and fifty miles," Tim explained, "providing the herd can be driven fifty miles across the sound on the ice."

The surgeon whistled. "It's never been done!" he said.

"There are a lot of things about the expedition that have never been done," Tim admitted. "I've never known a duty that gave more opportunity to make serious mistakes. Orders and plans have got to be elastic. We must be guided by circumstances whether we are together or alone. The job is to get food to the shipwrecked people in the shortest possible time."

With a light sled and the pick of the dogs, Tim left that night. He carried sufficient food for himself, dogs and guide, and the pouch of mail. They crossed the Yukon at the old Russian trading post, Andreafski and began encountering groups of miners mushing over the river ice.

"Plenty of miners," the guide explained. "River low. Steamer no get up. Ice come."

Tim swore. That meant many poorly equipped parties upriver would need assistance. Such aid was none of his concern, but the situation would materially reduce the supply of good dogs. In fact he hadn't seen but one good team on the river. Even his own, exhausted as they were, were better dogs than the average.

When three hundred and fifty miles lay behind them, the guide pointed to the ice. The dogs' worn pads had left faint crimson stains. "Maybe rest?" he suggested.

"There can't be any rest," Tim answered. "How far, St. Michael?"

"Day and a half," the man answered.

"We'll make it in a day, then," Tim said. From the first he had helped pull the load through heavy stretches. This day he ignored the bloodstains and lent greater assistance.

ASTONISHMENT greeted his arrival. Then a cheer went up from the mail-hungry mob as the miners noticed the pouch. Tim had no time for cheers. He reported to the commander of the military post and dropped into a chair. "Is there any news from Barrow?" he asked.

"A trader arrived from that region yesterday," the commander answered. "A man named Thatcher. I'll send for him."

Tim was too tired to rest; too eager to be off on the next leg of the journey. He drank the commander's black coffee and smoked his tobacco.

"I'll need a guide and dogs," Tim said. "I want to be on my way to Prince of Wales in the morning."

"You won't find anything better than your own team," the commander said.

"It'll take a week to rest them, and I can't spare that much time," Tim replied. "We didn't even hole up on Christmas day and it was blowing a gale. By the way, has there been any report of a girl

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landing anywhere between here and Cape Nome?"

"A girl?"

"Oh, just a rumor I heard," Tim said. "I am naturally checking up."

"I've heard nothing. Well, here's Thatcher," the commander added as a befurred individual with flaming beard and long red hair stamped into the room. The commander performed the introductions and explained Tim's mission.

"I want all the information you can give me," Tim said.

Thatcher spoke in the short sentences of those who spend much time alone and become grudging with words. "I planned to winter at Barrow. They're on short rations now. Decided I'd come here while I had my health and meat on my bones. Some of Bannings' fleet gone. Any relative of yours?"

"Uncle!"

Thatcher laughed shortly, grimly. "Ridleys won't shed no tears. Won't thank Gov'ment for sendin' expedition, either. If the shipwrecked folks are well fed they may be strong enough to salvage cargo."

"Why should the Ridleys object to that?" Tim asked.

"I know how much whale bone and oil's gone out of the Arctic the last five years," Thatcher replied. "The Bannings sold theirs, the Ridleys have held on for the price to go up. It'll go now. Like as not it's gone up already. When the trade's sure most of the whalin' fleet's wrecked, it'll go higher."

"And if the overland expedition fails?" Tim suggested.

Thatcher jerked a stubby thumb toward the ceiling.

"Where're the wrecks located? I'll get a chart," Tim offered.

"Strung along the beach from Hope to east of Barrow. I saw the *Audacious*," Thatcher added. "Lyin' on her port side on top of the ice. Pack musta squeezed her up."

"Her hull was built for it," Tim said. For a moment he was a whaler owner and not a Revenue Service officer. "Was she badly damaged?" Tim asked anxiously.

"Didn't look damaged to me. Went aboard, cooked myself a meal in the galley, spent the night there," Thatcher informed him. "Ice commenced to move next mornin' and I got out. Didn't want to become a ghost on a ghost ship. You know how it is, up there."

Tim knew. Ships were caught in the ice and sometimes crushed. Again they were carried away, to reappear a year or sometimes two or three years later. There was a never-ending struggle between the currents in the Arctic and the winds. And the ice for all its tremendous mass gave way meekly before the stronger force. With a real effort Tim put the *Audacious* out of his mind and resumed his questioning.

"What's Squaw Ridley doing?"

Thatcher grinned. "You know his reputation—he's hell on squaws and likker. When I last saw him he was doin' his best to preserve that reputation."

"Lieutenant Banning," the commander said, "may I suggest a good bed in view of your determination to push on in the morning? Suppose you leave the transportation problem to me?"

"You are probably right, sir," Tim answered. "I'll never have a better chance to build up a little strength."

"In the days to come you are going to need every ounce of strength in your body," the commander told him.

CHAPTER V

OLD KING COLE

TIM relaxed in a warm bed and the Ridleys came to haunt him. Everything Thatcher had said about Squaw Ridley was true. He was a dissolute white man who had gone native with a vengeance, yet had lost none of his father's greed for wealth and none of the man's ruthless desire to win a point regardless of methods.

The Ridleys had bone and oil in storage on both east and west coasts waiting for a rise in the market. If the trade was

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convinced the whaling fleet was lost, the price of bone would go sky high. For women must have corsets and whale bone was needed for the staves.

"But I can't believe Bill will go so far as to do anything to hamper the overland expedition," Tim mused. "But if he should . . . God help him!"

Just as he was dozing off, Mary Ridley appeared to join in the haunting. On a less important occasion her appearance would not have been unpleasant. "I can't shake off the feeling she's somewhere ahead of me," he growled, "and, of course, she'll probably play out and become a burden.

"If that's the case, I'll have to be . . . well . . . stern, and send her back. Or, if she insists on traveling north, I'll have to place her under arrest and confine her in some native village. She'll raise merry hell, but that can't be helped. I can't afford to have any woman delaying things; I've got to see that she doesn't try a little dirty work to boost the price of whalebone." Instantly he was ashamed of his suspicions.

Tim Banning stretched again and yawned. He closed his eyes and slept. To the northward there stretched a long, snow trail. Northern lights fluttered their orange and violet tints, and in the midst Mary Ridley's face appeared and disappeared, mocking and elusive. And when he tried to send her home she told him he was no gentleman and tried to slap him.

The commander awakened Tim and he blundered to the basin and washed his face in icy water. That partially aroused him, but his head ached and his eyes were heavy. "I slept hard," he said.

"You were worn out," the commander said. "I've everything packed and ready. I suggest a reindeer instead of dogs. Your own dogs have worn their pads down to the blood. And the others that are available aren't much. The reindeer is fresh, reliable and can live off the country. Can you drive one?"

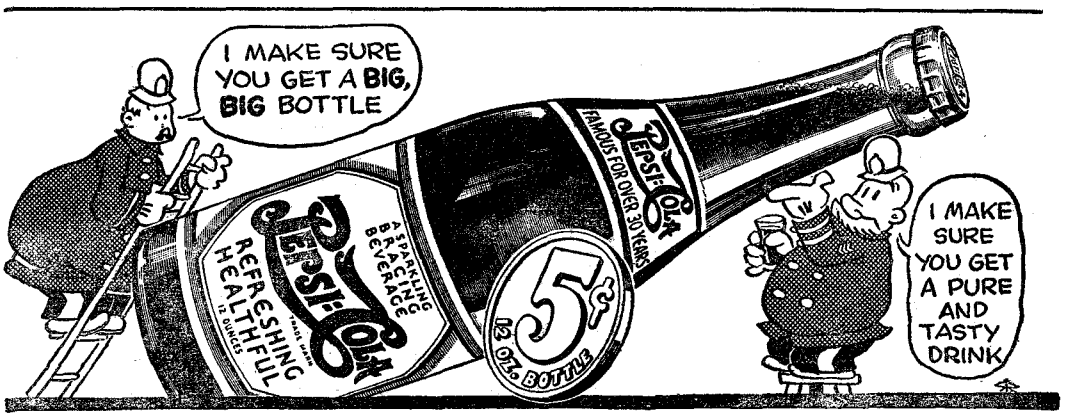
"I did—one," Tim answered. He spoke in the manner of one recalling a sad experience. "But I guess you're right, the dogs aren't up to what's ahead."

He ate slowly, knowing this might be the last good meal in a long time to come. Then he went outside. Two men were holding a reindeer attached to a sled on which was lashed Tim's outfit and sufficient provisions to see him through to Cape Prince of Wales.

The reindeer harness consisted of a collar of two flat pieces of wood. Short traces extended on either side to a breast piece. A single trace ran back from the breast piece, between the animal's legs, to the sled.

The animal was guided by a single line attached to the halter. The line was kept slack and used only in guiding or bringing the animal to a stop. "This critter is named Old King Cole," the commander explained. "And he's far from a merry old soul, but he's tough and strong. You should get through. Remember, in start-

(*Please turn the page*)



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ing, to be sure you are on the sled, or have a good grip on it. He'll leave camp as if there were a fire under him."

"Thanks," Tim answered. He shook hands all around, thanked those who had aided him, and glanced at the faces of the spectators. Little hope was to be found in their expressions. They regarded the entire expedition as impossible, though they applauded the effort the revenue service was making to take food to the stranded whalers.

Tim Banning was off today. In a few days Surgeon Newton, with a big party and numerous sleds, would leave the same post, to meet Tim at some vague point in the North—storms and accidents of the trail permitting. It was little wonder, Tim decided, that the spectators were dubious.

A malemute dog stalked from the shadows of a cabin and made a sudden rush at the deer, just missing its throat with its gleaming fangs. Tim jumped onto the sled as the deer broke it clear. The clicking, flying hoofs, pelted Tim with balls of ice and frozen sod. "That's another thing I forgot to warn you about," the commander yelled. "Be careful dogs and wolves don't stampede your deer."

"And how many more things should I be warned about," Tim thought as he hung on. The post dropped rapidly behind. He didn't look back as they waved farewells; he was too busy with the sled.

OLD KING COLE presently slowed down to an easy, tireless jog that ate up miles of frozen sea. The wind blew keen and sharp from the northeast as if it were trying to hold him back with a myriad of invisible hands.

The length of each day's travel—in the days that followed—was measured by his own strength. It was something that must be spread over vast distances, and not used up in a sudden burst of enthusiasm for the duty he faced. And while he conserved his strength at Old King Cole's expense, riding as much as possible, it was also colder traveling than running beside a dog sled. Each night he tethered the reindeer near camp, using a line of sufficient length to permit him to gather moss.

There was a monotony to it all that attacked a man's morale. Each day it was the same—wind-swept tundra, gaunt ridges and stretches of sea ice. He felt like a rat in a tread-mill—fighting tirelessly, yet making no progress.

Late one night he rounded a small cape and for a moment the wind slackened. An odd calmness lay on the land. He glanced toward an inlet that looked as if a deeply driven ice wedge had forced it apart. Tim stopped abruptly and sniffed. "Wood smoke!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's built a fire of driftwood."

There is nothing exactly like the smoke of burning wood that has been impregnated with salt water. It carries a distinctive tang and conjures pictures of exposed flats, shattered hulls and scurrying crabs.

A campfire, glowing like a ruby on an ermine cape, lay at the head of the inlet. Tim turned the deer and approached, whip ready to lash off any attack by dogs. He heard their eerie howls; then as a vagrant breeze carried the deer scent, their howls changed to eager snarls.

He presently made them out—malemutes securely chained to a driftwood log. "Hello!" Tim yelled.

A sleeping bag stirred and a head appeared. "Hello, Tim," a familiar voice answered, "I've been expecting you'd show up soon."

"Mary Ridley!" Tim exclaimed. "What in the hell are you doing up here?"

"Is that any way to talk to a lady?" the girl demanded. She snuggled deeper into her sleeping bag, until her dark eyes were visible.

"A lady's got no business up here in the dead of winter, or any other time," he stormed.

"Surprised?" she asked. There was a note of sarcasm in her voice, and perhaps something suggesting a challenge.

"I shouldn't be," he admitted. "The college roommate you were supposed to

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visit in Victoria, *Nora,* passed us as we were coming north. Some suggested she was on a shakedown cruise. But I argued that the Ridleys didn't shake down whalers that way. I had an idea the *Nora* might have landed you on the north shore of Norton Sound. Then as I heard nothing of a strange girl mushing in these parts I concluded the ice had beaten the *Nora* back and you were still aboard."

"You should have seen the *Nora* handle herself in the ice, Tim," the girl said with enthusiasm. "She's a much finer ship than even your *Audacious.*"

"What are your plans?" he asked bluntly. "That's an official question, Mary."

"I'M going to Point Barrow to look after the Ridley interests," she quietly informed him. "I had an idea you would be along soon. I thought it would be nice if we traveled together. I'll break my share of the trail, and that is much more sensible than two people each breaking a separate trail, don't you think?"

"I might have passed you," he suggested.

"Each morning I've examined the country to make certain you didn't pass in the night," she explained. "Now, Tim," she continued in a determined voice, "let's not have a lot of silly talk about the North being no place for a girl. Please don't swell up your chest, pop the buttons off your uniform and try to exert the authority you probably have, because I'm going to Point Barrow. As your dear Uncle Phineas would say—all hell can't stop me."

Her jaw set stubbornly.

That was typical of the girl. She knew a showdown of some sort must be met and overcome, and she decided to get it over with. When he didn't answer, she added, "You know my brother Bill never has taken the interest in the management of the company that I have. I should have been a boy. But as I turned out to be a girl I'll have to make the best of it. And so will everyone else, including you."

He grinned down at her, ignoring the argument. "You appear to have everything all planned out," he said. "I'll be getting under way, again. The importance of my duty allows no time for pleasant chats. Goodbye, Mary."

"Tim Banning!" she said sharply, "You aren't fooling me. You know I won't turn back, and you've thought up some scheme."

"My orders are very elastic," he answered with a grin, "I am to overcome each obstacle in my own way as it is faced." He tapped his breast. "I still have your letter to your brother, which I hope to deliver personally. A neat little device, I might say, to trick me into believing you had no thought of going north."

Their glances met angrily.

"That should be a warning, Tim, that my deceitful little head is full of little devices, as you call them. When a girl's back is to the wall, she is forced to think fast."

He waved, returned to the sled, and headed once more toward Cape Prince Of Wales. "She's going to be an infernal nuisance," he growled. Then he swore with feeling.

He kept to the ice until nearly midnight, then turned ashore and pulled up at a driftwood cabin. He had landed here the previous summer in a routine visit to isolated cabins. This was but one of many scattered along the coast and occupied occasionally by prospectors.

Snow had drifted half way up the door, which was unlocked. He cleared away the snow and entered. The cabin contained two bunks, a stove, cooking utensils, tin dishes, enough split driftwood to last until spring and a stock of provisions. "Thank the Lord for a good memory," Tim said, surveying the contents of the room with approval. "This will do."

Tim made no effort to turn in, but enjoyed the warmth of the stove, and a smoke. He had a pretty definite idea the first hurdle of the Overland Expedition was at hand.

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Two hours passed before he heard sled runners scraping over the snow. A dog team halted near the door and Tim went out. "Here I am, Tim," Mary said quietly. "You might as well realize you can't rid yourself of me."

"Pretty determined, aren't you? We'll settle this matter in the morning. I'll help you unharness." He carried the various packs on her sled inside, secured the dogs in the usual Northern manner—chaining them a sufficient distance apart to prevent fighting—and then indicated the lower bunk. "You might as well turn in and finish your night's sleep," he suggested.

He spread his sleeping bag on the top bunk and crawled in. Five minutes later she heard him sleeping soundly. It was rather exasperating, she decided. She would have been easier if he had worried somewhat over her presence.

CHAPTER VI

WHITE DREAM

TIM BANNING was getting breakfast when Mary Ridley awakened. "What're you doing up at this terrible hour?" she asked.

"I've got to put thirty miles behind me today," he informed her. "Breakfast is ready."

They sparred with their eyes as they ate. "Now listen, Mary," he said when they had finished, "I don't want to get unpleasant with you. The truth is if you trail me you'll hamper my movements. I can't leave you stranded somewhere along the trail in this wild country. If you should happen to be injured—and there's plenty of chance that will happen—then you'll be a burden. It isn't fair to the three hundred odd whalers—many of them your men—at Barrow. I'm asking you to remain here until you can be sent back to St. Michael."

"I've been in the North, off and on, all my life," she replied. "I think I can take care of myself. If not, I'm asking no more consideration than you would give a man. But Ridley whalers are stranded at Barrow, the Ridley fortune is involved. I'm going along."

"You're not," he said sharply. "As a Revenue Service officer I order you to remain."

She regarded him with cold contempt. "Well, that's one way of putting a business rival at a disadvantage," she suggested.

"You know better than that!" he roared. "I'll play no favorites on this expedition."

She studied him a moment, her eyes smiling. Then she said quickly, "I *do* know better, Tim. That was unfair and I'm sorry."

He nodded grudgingly, hardly knowing whether she was shooting square now, or trying a different method of gaining her point. "Then you are staying here?" he asked bluntly.

"No. I'm going to Barrow," she declared.

She glared at him defiantly.

He drew in a deep breath and unconsciously squared his shoulders. He began emptying the contents of her packs onto the floor. "What're you doing?" she demanded.

"I am exercising my right to confiscate any supplies I find that are necessary to the success of the Overland Expedition," he explained. "I'll need your sled, of course, to carry the extra weight. But you may keep your dogs. They might annoy Old King Cole."

"You are deliberately stranding me here," she panted. "You beast!" Mary jumped half the length of the room, caught Tim off balance and knocked him to the floor. She landed on top, striking him with her fists. One blow struck him squarely in the eye and several stars seemed to explode.

He heard her laugh.

He brushed her off with a sweep of his arm. "You little hell-cat!" he growled. He got to his knees, warded off a second attack, then picked her up bodily and tossed her onto the bunk. He tied her hand and foot, then sat down to catch his breath. "You can fume all you want to but it'll do no good," he informed her.

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Tim searched her outfit, appropriating such items as he could actually use. He made them up into a neat pack and lashed the pack onto his sled. "I'll give you a receipt for this," he said, "and in due time you'll be paid. I don't know, offhand, what the penalty is for a young lady attacking a Federal officer under these circumstances, but it is pretty stiff. We'll let that pass, however."

"I insist on paying the penalty," she shouted, "even if it's to be hanged from the yardarm of your old revenue cutter."

"In an hour or so," he continued, "you can work yourself free of your bonds. With fuel and food you should be quite comfortable until you can be taken out of the country." He carried his own outfit to the sled, hitched the reindeer onto the front end and attached the dog sled to the back. Then he looked into the cabin once more.

"Goodbye, Miss Ridley," he said, giving her a smart salute.

There was a promise of future trouble in her blazing eyes—and lots of it.

"What a fine old rumpus this will create when it's known in the States," Tim reflected. "I can see the newspaper accounts: 'Revenue Cutter officer binds girl business rival and leaves her in remote Arctic cabin!' Wow! Men have been lynched for less than that."

OLD King Cole showed little relish to proceed as they left the shelter of the inlet and faced a blast howling out of the north. Tim couldn't see more than fifty yards ahead of the deer. After the second hour the storm closed in and there were moments when the deer's head wasn't visible. The cold ate deep and by every rule of the trail he should have hunted cover. But the margin between life and death of many men might be measured in days or even hours and Tim doggedly pushed on.

It settled down now to a battle between Tim and the biting blast of the storm, with Old King Cole on the side of the elements.

Running wasn't pleasant, but riding the sled was worse, so he ran much of the time. Alertness gave way to mechanical plodding. There were times when it looked as if the deer might quit. Suddenly Old King Cole bounded to the left and then lurched ahead. Tim lost his grasp on the sled and sprawled in the snow. He jumped up, all too aware of what this might mean.

The sled was just vanishing. He yelled at the deer, hoping to calm him, wondering what could have caused his panic. Tim drove himself furiously, in pursuit, momentarily expecting the deer to slow down. As a rule the sudden starts were confined to the early morning when the animals were fresh.

The tracks became vague and disappeared altogether. Tim stopped. Food, sleeping bag, in fact everything he possessed except the clothes he stood in, were on that sled. He knew the Arctic—knew that aimless wandering invariably ended in exhaustion and death by the cold. He remembered Old King Cole had bolted at a point where a ridge partly broke the force of the gale. He decided to hole in there and wait for the storm to break. When landmarks were visible, he could make his way back to the cabin and face Mary Ridley's biting amazement.

It was certainly not a comforting thought. He grinned ruefully.

"She'll rub it into me, plenty," he reflected. "Hello, that looks like a drifted over sled track!" Tim saw two straight, faintly defined depressions running parallel. The depressions intersected the depressions left by his own sled. Only the ridge, breaking the driving snow, prevented the runner marks from being entirely covered.

Patiently, methodically he followed the sled tracks to a point where a boulder caught the snow and left them clear. Someone driving a dog team was traveling north also, and traveling light. But who would be traveling light at that time of the year? Who would be traveling north at all? It looked suspicious. Apparently

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Old King Cole had caught the dog scent and bolted before the dogs ever scented him.

Tim eliminated Mary at once. She didn't have a sled and for all her hurry she wouldn't be traveling light. But something might have happened to Newton, and this might be his messenger trying to overtake Tim.

Then Tim promptly eliminated that possibility. The strange musher, whoever he was, could not have missed the tracks the reindeer and sled left. A glance would have told him they were but a few minutes old. Ordinary trail courtesy, if not downright curiosity, should have prompted the musher to overtake Tim and exchange a few words. Yet the man had gone on in the teeth of the the worst storm Tim had ever faced.

Tim crouched in the partial shelter of an overhanging rock and watched the snow slowly pile up around him. Whenever it threatened to cover him, he stood up and kicked the drifts away. He lost track of time. Frost is insidious, patient. It lulls even the experienced victim into a sense of false security and even of comfort.

Tom's head dropped forward on his chest; the insistent dancing of frost fingers in his brain had dulled the edge of his vigilance. The necessity of keeping awake no longer seemed important. Nothing seemed important. His will relaxed and he drifted into a blank white world that had no geography at all.

He dozed and saw a tropical pool and bronzed, naked maidens swimming lazily about. The pool vanished and he saw a mighty temple, with row on row of columns cut from white marble. Or was it ice? Yes, that was it—an ice temple.

There was a girl, too, dressed in furs. Tim noticed details—a caribou skin parka, with a wolverine fur facing; trousers of caribou skin and mukluks or skin boots. She knew how to dress for the North, Tim thought; then the parka hood feel back and he saw Mary Ridley's face. Her eyes were lively with amusement.

Someone was jingling bells—the rhythmic sound of sleigh bells attached to a running person or animal. They grew louder and louder, then faded as they passed on. Mary disappeared, the ice temple vanished and Tim Banning opened his eyes.

The strength of the storm had increased. There was an eerie, high-pitched scream to the wind. But somehow Tim didn't care; didn't care if it did stretch a white blanket from the Arctic Ocean to the Alaskan Gulf and completely covered the stranded whalers as well as himself

Nothing mattered. . . .

Then suddenly Tim aroused himself and fought off the icy fog enveloping his brain. And he knew that he did care. But the storm, scorning all, roared on, spreading its blanket from the Arctic to the Gulf.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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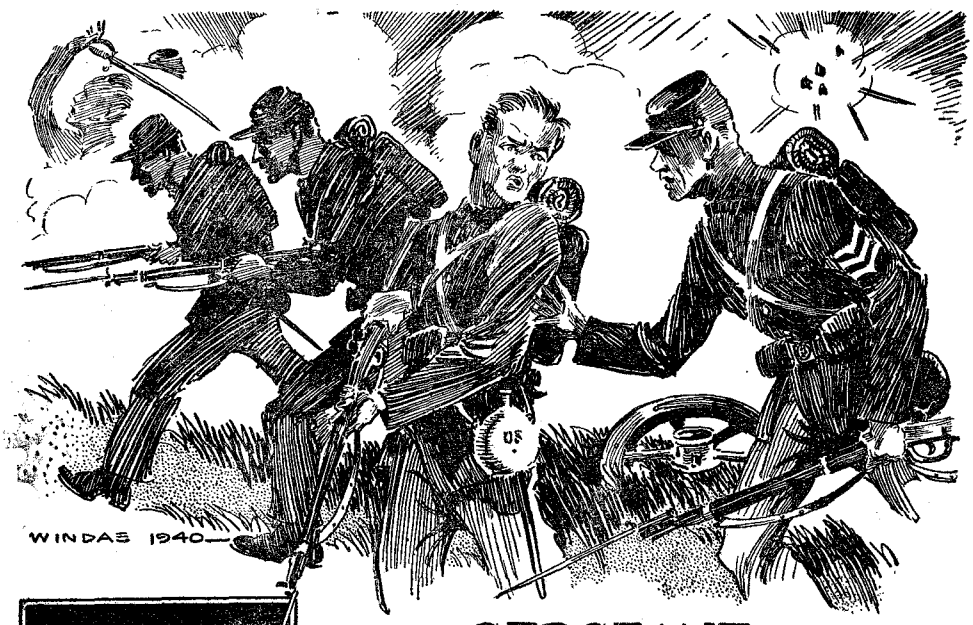
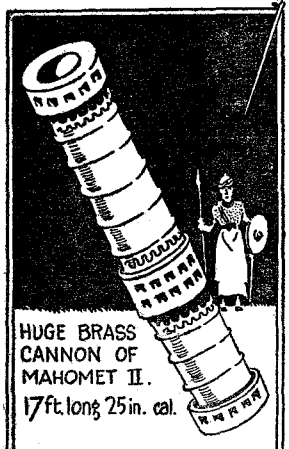
LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS



· SERGEANT ·

This N.C.O. derives his name from two French words, "Serre Gens," meaning file closers. These, originally, were the veterans of the army, who used to march in rear of the recruits during an attack, and keep them from breaking ranks or running away.



HUGE BRASS CANNON OF MAHOMET II. 17ft. long 25in. cal.

·HEAVY GUNS·

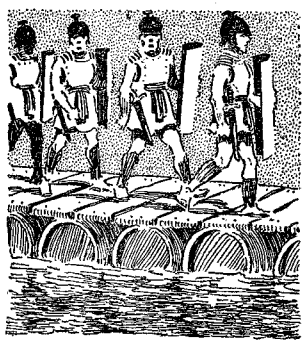
Development of modern artillery has not always meant continuous increase in size. Even so far back as 1453 A.D., Mahomet laid siege to Constantinople with guns weighing 9 tons and throwing 1500 lb. stones 1½ miles, to pierce the city's 6 foot thick walls.

·MILESTONES·

Were extensively used on the elaborate network of Roman highways. They were set up every 1,000 paces, as the legions marched, and although English miles are 1760 yards, the name has been retained.

·CASK-FLOAT BRIDGES·

Casks have often been used for pontoon bridges. The first instance of their being so used was by the Roman Emperor Maximin.



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Señor Flatfoot

By CORNELL WOOLRICH
Author of "The Eye of Doom," "Wild Bill Hiccup," etc.

Explosive and devious is the course of Latin-American politics—but not without fascination. Today's lesson includes a general with a failing for wristwatches; another general who added one and one to get approximately five; a non-com who preferred Marx to local history; and a girl who should have been labeled TNT

I

O'ROURKE was enjoying a gin-and-lime under the arcade fronting the Plaza when the government changed on him. Or around him, whichever way you care to put it.

O'Rourke kept right on being good Manhattan, but Zacamoras did a flip-up from Federalista to Liberalista at one past five in the afternoon. By ten after it was all over.

A shot at the edge of the town was the signal. Then there were a lot more. *Sput-sput-sput-sput*. O'Rourke stayed where he was, lit another blistering native cigarette, and wondered what the boys back on Centre Street were doing just then.

A handful of men in dusty yellow khaki came backing slowly into the Plaza, occasionally raising antiquated Mausers to their shoulders and letting fly. This was the local garrison in retreat.

Other shots, from the outskirts, came

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The general was raging, ready to shoot anyone, when the Pascals were thrust into his room. Luisa's eyes met O'Rourke's briefly

Adventure Novelet

back in answer. That was the oncoming Feds, or maybe it was the Libs; O'Rourke should know the difference.

This banging kept up questioningly for a moment or two longer, after the local defenders had moved out. Getting no answer, it broke off; there was a triumphant rebel yell, and a bevy of horsemen in cartwheel sombreros came clattering into the Plaza, wheeling and rearing their mounts in approved Wild West fashion.

After them, amid appropriate *"vivas!,"* throwing-up of sombreros, and sky-shots, a Model T Ford arrived. From it descended the dreaded General Inocencia Escobar and his equally dreaded half-brother Angelito, "liberators of the people."

Their given names, from what O'Rourke had gathered, were slightly misleading. They were said to be bad medicine. To his experienced eye they were just a pair of micky finns with no takers; he'd handled tougher guys every day of his life.

They stalked in and promptly turned O'Rourke's hotel into their revolutionary headquarters. When he went in himself later, he found them dining in state in the middle of the patio, with assorted underlings and soldierettes, at a long table made up of a lot of little tables pushed together.

Which meant O'Rourke had to do with-

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out supper or eat it in his lap. He didn't mind; he was getting sick of rice and beans by now anyway. He'd often wondered, since he'd been here, who was taking the most punishment· the wanted killer he'd come down after, who was laid up in the hospital with typhoid, or himself, forced to louse around outside waiting for him to get well enough to travel.

HE yawned and made the mistake of hitching up his cuff and looking at his wristwatch. An honor guard of two was promptly sent to bring him over. The generals had never seen a wristwatch before. O'Rourke accommodatingly took it off for them. There were too many automatics lying beside the knives and forks for him to be selfish about it.

Inocencia tried it on first. Then Angelito tried it on. Then it went all around the table from wrist to wrist, until it got back to Inocencia again. By that time O'Rourke wasn't sure he wanted to put it on again, without first dipping the strap in carbolic acid or something.

"I'll buy," glared the general. "How much?" His expression indicated it wouldn't have been tactful to refuse to do business.

O'Rourke didn't mind. You didn't need a watch in Zacamoras as much as in New York; there was no place to go. He named a good stiff price.

The general didn't balk. He thumbed over an adjutant or quartermaster of some kind. "Pay him, Pablito," he ordered. The quartermaster whispered something in his ear.

The general looked unconcerned. "No?" he said. "Well, levy a contribution on the town, to replenish our war chest. Get hold of the *alcalde* and hold him as a hostage until he digs it up."

The mayor was going to be the fall guy. Inocencia turned back to O'Rourke again. "I'll give you an IOU, until our campaign funds have caught up with us."

"That'll be as good as gold," said O'Rourke caustically.

"You bet," agreed the general, quite without guile.

The quartermaster presented a voucher and he duly made his mark, an x, at the bottom of it.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" O'Rourke said with a straight face. "How does one tell the difference between your own signature and that of the other general, here?"

"Oh, that's easy," said Escobar blandly. "Mine goes up and down, like this:+. His goes from side to side, like this:X."

"You military men think of everything," said O'Rourke with mock admiration.

He went back to where he'd been sitting and waited to see what would happen next. A cowering old man was thrust forward between two soldiers. "You the *alcalde?*" glowered Inocencia.

"The ex-*alcalde*," corrected his half-brother. "We'll appoint one of our own tomorrow."

There was a whispered consultation. Then one of the two generals pointed a menacing finger at the quailing official before him. "We assess you ten thousand pesos for support of the cause. And it's got to be in by nine tomorrow morning."

"There isn't that much in the whole town!" wailed the victim.

"That's your tough luck. You're going to stay in jail until that money's in."

"But I'm an old man, I'm not well."

"We'll cure you. Take him away and lock him up, Pablito."

The terrified *alcalde* was trundled off, still protesting. "It always works," the general told his associates, with a ponderous wink. They all had a good belly laugh over it.

O'Rourke considered it pretty poor sport, but it was no skin off his nose. He was out of jurisdiction here. Just the same he wouldn't have minded having one or two of them,—especially that quartermaster, Pablito—alone with him in the basement of a nice out-of-the-way Jamaica station house for a half-hour workout.

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HE checked upstairs around ten or so. But if he thought he was going to get any sleep, he didn't know his revolutions. One of the two generals— Inocencia, the one who had chiseled his wristwatch— requisitioned a large room a few doors down from his own, at the end of the same corridor.

Both rooms gave onto a long outside gallery or balcony, which ran around the entire face of the building at second-story height. The other general had apparently chosen quarters in the opposite wing; he didn't show up.

A sentry was posted outside the door, not so much for protection as to add a touch of swank; and from then on the amount of noise that went on in there made O'Rourke think the whole army must be bivouacked inside. But it was evidently only the general and a few choice staff-members having a nightcap to celebrate the afternoon's victory. It finally tapered off and the silence of tropic night descended on Zacamoras.

Then just as he was dozing off under his mosquito netting, a feather-light tap came on his own door. He knew to begin with it must be a mistake; he didn't know a soul in town except that guy in the hospital, and he had a leg-chain fastening him to his cot.

It didn't improve his temper any. He started to talk to himself in a seething undertone, while he swung his feet to the floor and battled lengths of mosquito netting.

"They make me eat my meal on the cuff, they take my watch, they keep me awake half the night with their racket— and then their dates show up at my door by mistake!"

He knew it must be a woman; no man would have tapped so daintily. He got into his pants, strode over to the door barefooted, swung it back, and glared.

"No ice today, lady," he barked. Then he scotched it quick, and felt like a fool.

The girl before him wasn't anybody's date, least of all a revolutionary general's. She wasn't more than nineteen. Her skin had the camelia-like whiteness that comes from seldom being exposed to the sun. It made her eyes seem twice as dark as they were, which made them four times darker than he'd ever known eyes could be.

She was all in black, with a lace shawl hooded around her head, one end of it drawn across her mouth in semi-Oriental fashion. A small jet cross peering from her breast was her only ornament.

She drew back a startled step before his outburst. "Oh,—I'm so sorry, *señor*. I'm looking for this general Escobar." The way she said it made the "general" a discourtesy title, rather than anything else.

"Up there where that sentry—" he started to say. Then he saw the reason for her loss of bearings. The sentry had momentarily deserted his post, presumably to hoist a quick one down in the patio. "That end door up there," he explained.

HE stood there a moment looking after her. She was moving down the tiled corridor with such obvious trepidation, that he couldn't resist asking: "Pardon me, *señorita,* but—did you come here alone?"

Her dark eyes grew larger as she turned her head, as if he were only naming her own fears. "I had to. There was no one I could bring with me."

"Well, excuse me for butting in; but are you sure you want to go in there by yourself."

"I have to. You see, my father—"

"Oh, the *alcalde.* Yes, I watched that."

"He has a weak heart. I'm afraid the excitement and fright alone are enough to—We are raising the money. My brother is out getting it right now. I have come to intercede for him with the general."

"I know, but he's probably had a few drinks by now; see what I mean?"

She moistened her lips nervously. "I have a knife with me." It was evidently concealed in her dress.

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"Want me to go in with you? Be only too glad to."

"Thank you, *señor*, but it is better if I go alone. People of his breed think that to show generosity is a sign of weakness. In the presence of a third person he is likely to make it a point to be relentless. It is only if I can see him alone that I have any chance of winning him over. That is why I came even without my brother's knowledge."

O'Rourke had to admit there might be something to what she said.

"Call out if you need me," he suggested crisply.

The truant sentry reappeared just then, wiping his mouth along his sleeve. "Ask your general if a lady may come in and speak to him," O'Rourke heard her murmur tremulously.

The sentry came out again, said: "Sure, any time—day or night." There was a leer in it if O'Rourke had ever heard one. The door at the upper end of the passageway closed. O'Rourke closed his own door. He didn't get back under the netting, but decided he'd wait up until he heard her come out again. He lit a cigarette, to take the place of the netting while he waited.

The payoff came in no time at all. She'd been in there hardly five minutes than a short, swift scream came winging up in the silence. It sounded more indignant than terrified.

O'Rourke jumped, took a hitch in his belt, and started for his own door. Before he could get to it, he heard her come outside on the balcony that ran past both rooms. "Will you let me leave?" she said sharply.

O'Rourke turned and went out that way instead. She was alone out there, groping her way toward O'Rourke's room. A swath of yellow light behind her placed the general's room. He hadn't come out after her; evidently couldn't make the window embrasure, wide as it was, without a compass. She ran the few remaining steps toward O'Rourke with delighted relief.

"So he got out of line, huh?" he said gruffly.

"He's hopelessly drunk in there, and to make matters worse I find that the entire sum has already been raised and delivered to him by my brother and our friends, so I sought him out for nothing. He showed it to me in there.

"Now he still refuses to release my father. Need you ask what the new conditions are? He pulled the knife out of my hand like a stick of candy when I drew it to make him keep his distance. I left it in there with him."

"I think I'll go in and have a word with him," O'Rourke growled truculently.

She edged him back into the room before her. "No, don't *señor*. You will only antagonize him, and then we will never secure my father's release. Come inside before he sees us."

"But he's coming after you now." A surreptitious footfall sounded on the balcony floor; vine leaves rustled as if somebody had brushed into them, then there was silence. "I'll quiet him down for the night," O'Rourke promised grimly.

Again she forestalled him. "Please! It will only make matters worse. The best thing is for me to leave quietly by the door of your room."

He opened it and looked out. The ambulating sentry had again gone off looking for liquid refreshment. O'Rourke signaled to her that the coast was clear. "Let me take you as far as your door. The town's full of soldiers."

"No, it is not far. I will be all right. Thank you for your kindness, *señor*." She started to tiptoe down the passage, to avoid bringing the general out.

SUDDENLY the bottom of her dress flared like a hoopskirt and she had darted back and fled inside his doorway again. "My brother!" she whispered. "I recognized him on the stairs just now. He must be coming to find out why the release wasn't granted."

O'Rourke motioned her behind him, narrowed his door, peered watchfully

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through the crack. The man he saw was little more than a boy himself, with the girl's same fairness of skin.

O'Rourke saw him go up to the general's door, knuckle it lightly. The answer from inside was too low for O'Rourke to catch. He saw him try the knob, step in, and close the door behind him.

The girl brushed by O'Rourke, flashed him a look of thanks; there was a flurry of black skirts and filmy shawl, and she had vanished around the turn of the passage leading to the stairs.

O'Rourke kept watch to find out what luck her brother would have with the general. Young Pascal came out backwards, inside of five minutes. He closed the door and stood there for a moment, his face ghostly.

O'Rourke could see both his wrists shaking slightly as he held up something between them. It was a small oblong of paper, somewhat resembling the IOU the general had given O'Rourke earlier in the evening. O'Rourke guessed that it must be the order for the elder Pascal's release.

The boy hastily pocketed it, looked warily about him, then moved off in the same direction his sister had taken, trying to step as soundlessly as possible. One o'clock tolled dismally from the belfry of the venerable church.

O'Rourke closed his door and turned back into his room for the last time that night. "Heavy traffic," he grunted.

II

A COMMOTION in the hall roused him sometime after daybreak. First he thought the opposition must have counterattacked; but there was no gunfire—only a constant stomping back and forth of many feet, and a welter of jabbering voices.

Someone—it sounded like one of the two generals—was sputtering rapid-fire orders and imprecations right and left. "I will burn the town to the ground! I will shoot every able-bodied man! Who was in there last?"

"A girl, I think it was the old *alcalde's* daughter."

"Take a squad and get over there fast. If they've gone already, go after them. They'll head for the front lines, try to get through to the other side. But they've got to go on foot; we commandeered every horse in the place ourselves last night. Don't come back without them, *comprende?* They'll pay for this!"

O'Rourke finished his dressing fast, to get out there and learn just what the thing was. He came barging out still spinning the ends of his necktie around in a loop. "What's the matter, General?"

It was the one who hadn't taken his wristwatch—Angelito. "My brother has been foully murdered in the middle of the night!" he boomed, too excited to recall that, technically, it was none of O'Rourke's business and he had no right asking questions. He pointed dramatically to the open doorway behind him. "Come in and see for yourself."

O'Rourke did, without waiting to be asked twice. The general lay sprawled inertly across his bed, one leg trailing down to the floor as if he had started to rear up when it happened.

The mother-of-pearl haft of a small but malignant dagger sat like a valve directly over his heart. It had been driven in up to the guard. His arms had flopped wide at the instant of death, palms up. They more than spanned the bed, for he had a good reach.

A neat little tortoise-shell scabbard lay on the floor close by. On it, in silver, was the initial P, in a wreath.

O'Rourke was thinking of the girl as he picked it up, tapped it thoughtfully across his pulse. "Want me to work on it for you?" he hazarded.

"Work on it? What for? I can work on it myself." The general, misunderstanding, reached down toward the corpse, wrenched, and the knife came up.

"There, what was hard about that?" he said, and carefully proceeded to wipe both handle and blade on a corner of the bedding. But then there weren't any

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facilities for handling prints down here anyway, O'Rourke reminded himself after his first moment of consternation.

He tried again. "I'm a detective. You know what a detective is, don't you?"

"No. What's a detective?"

"LOOK," explained O'Rourke patiently. "In my country we have people killed like that too. We have special men to find out who did it. I'm one of them. Why don't you let me find out who did it?"

"But we already know that, we don't have to find out. The *alcalde's* daughter, that Pascal girl, did it. The sentry saw her come in here last night."

O'Rourke thumbed the sentry disparagingly. "Can he tell you what time it happened? *I* can, and I wasn't even in here at all. It happened at ten past one."

The general made a rubber tire out of his lower lip. "How do you know?"

Which was just what he'd wanted them to ask. All this was by way of buildup, to get the job. He picked up the corpse's right arm, held it aloft, pointed to the wrist. A couple of little glistening shards trickled down inside the sleeve.

"What do the hands say? One and two. His arms flopped wide as the knife went in. One of them went a little too far over the side, hit the edge of the bedboard down there smack across the face of the watch, shattered the crystal. It stopped dead on the minute, at the instant of attack. Now do you see what a detective is?"

It went over big. A hum of admiration went up. It might have been elementary in Elmhurst or Elmira; down here it was black magic. O'Rourke cashed in while the cashing was good. "How about it? Will you let me handle it for you?"

"Can you do it as quick as that?"

"Not exactly, but what's the rush? I thought you people were never in a hurry down here?"

"But I want to shoot someone right today for killing my brother," the general explained reasonably.

"Do you want to shoot someone and then find out later you shot the wrong person?"

"No-o," admitted the general, but with an air of merely splitting hairs.

"Then just give me time, and you can shoot to your heart's content." Multiple feet were coming back along the passageway outside. Rifle butts cracked to the floor. Luisa Pascal and her brother were thrust into the room. The boy's hands were bound behind his back; the girl's had been left free.

Her eyes met O'Rourke's briefly, but she gave no sign of ever having seen him before.

"We stopped them halfway to the opposition's outposts," gloated the subaltern who'd been sent out after them. 'They'd gotten a lift in a burro cart driven by an old Indian woman who was gathering maguey leaves. We let her go on after we pulled them out of it."

"Where's the old man?"

"He wasn't with them; must be hiding back here in town." The girl and her brother exchanged a complacent look.

Escobar raised clenched fists high over his head in exasperation. "You fools! He must have been the old woman with a *reboso* covering his head. You let him slip through your fingers! I ought to—"

So the kids had sacrificed themselves for the father. More power to them, thought O'Rourke. He felt more than ever like giving them a helping hand.

But all sentimentality aside, the determining factor was that he didn't believe either one of them had done it. One o'clock had struck as young Pascal tiptoed out of the room. The girl had left even a minute or two sooner. The general had lived until ten after.

He was watching them closely. Their present actions showed that neither one of them had known until now that the general was dead. The girl gave a start; her gaze traveled speculatively to her brother, then she closed her eyes fearfully.

The boy looked at the pearl-handled knife, his face paled with recognition; then

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his glance sought out his sister's face in turn. "I did it," he muttered doggedly all at once.

The girl tilted her head defiantly. "No, I was the one who did it."

Each thought the other guilty; each was trying to save the other. O'Rourke had stopped thinking they were cute by now, was scowling at them. They were only gumming up the works.

"I want to talk to the suspects alone for a minute, before we go any further," he told the general. "It's always done in my country. You can stay here in the room; I'll just take them over in the corner one at a time."

He tackled the girl first. "He didn't do it. The church bell struck one when he came out, and the general didn't die until one-ten. The watch on his wrist fixes that. I know you didn't either; I don't have to ask that."

"No, he was still alive when I escaped through the window. But if they try to shoot Ricardo for it, then I will say I did it."

"If I promise to do everything in my power to save your brother, will you agree to keep quiet from now on? It's going to be tough enough as it is."

She bowed her head.

"I place myself in your hands, *señor*," she murmured submissively.

. . . Then to the brother: "Your sister didn't do it."

"But it is a knife that used to belong to my father," breathed the boy fearfully. "I recognize it, and I didn't bring it here, so she must have."

"She did go to the general last night, bringing the knife for protection; he took it from her and it stayed in there with him. Answer me one thing: was he dead yet when you went in there?"

"No, he was snoring through his mouth."

"Well, she left before you did. I was the means of helping her to evade him, so I ought to know what I'm talking about. Now are you convinced? Will you quit balling things up? As for that spiked release you signed yourself in there, did you put his full name to it?"

"Yes."

"He couldn't sign his name, so we can't use it as proof he was still alive when you left. On the contrary, it will count heavily against you; but maybe I can get hold of it and destroy it. Now for the present I can keep only one of you out of jail. So we'd better make it your sister."

"Naturally," agreed Pascal.

O'Rourke turned to the general. "They didn't both do it."

"Why not?"

"Because there's only one knife."

Another of those buzzes of amazed agreement went up. There was a lot of head-wagging, animated gesturing. O'Rourke hit while the iron was hot. "So hang onto the man, and let the girl go back to her house. You can always get hold of her again if you change your mind."

The general looked vaguely doubtful.

"A great general like you doesn't have young girls taken out and shot. Napoleon never had women shot." He didn't like the dead pan he got on this. "You've heard of Napoleon, haven't you?" he faltered.

"No. Who was *he?*" asked the general interestedly.

O'Rourke took a deep breath. This reminded him of kindergarten. He tried another means of approach. "Did you lose one brother or two, General?"

Escobar glanced at the bier as if to make sure. "One."

"Then how many people should you execute for killing him?"

"All the people I can lay hands on," said the general hopefully.

"No. One murder, one execution. Two murders, two executions." He told it off on his fingers to illustrate.

THE general looked anything but convinced, but he finally gave in, overawed by O'Rourke's appalling mathematics. "All right, throw him in jail and let her go. I'll see how I feel after we shoot him. If I'm still not satisfied, I can have her taken out and shot after all."

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O'Rourke didn't argue that point yet. He motioned to the girl to get out fast, before they changed their minds. She stopped a moment before him, whispered: "You'll do what you can for Ricardo, *señor?* I'll burn a candle for you tonight."

He felt like saying "Better make it two; I'll need them." He gave her an encouraging wink instead. Escobar sent a couple of his men over with orders to stand guard outside her house and see that she didn't try to get away.

The girl safely out of it, the remaining prisoner was hauled unceremoniously from the room on his way to jail. The dead general went next, and that cleared the decks for action.

Down here there could be no question of autopsies, photographs, print dusting, chemical analyses, or any of the rest of it. Burial had to be fairly fast because of the climate, too.

In other words, O'Rourke had to work from scratch; there wasn't so much as a tape measure or high-powered glass in the whole town. It was, roughly, like working on an early nineteenth-century murder case, with nothing more than your hands and eyes and brains.

"You knew, General, that the assessment on the city had already been turned in to your brother before he met his death?" he began, with a lot more assurance than he felt.

Escobar scowled blackly. This was evidently more of a sore point than the loss of his relative. "Of course. And now it's gone. That murdering *alcalde's* son stole it at the same time he took my poor brother's life. It was undoubtedly under those maguey leaves in the cart in which the father made his getaway."

"Excuse me, my General," faltered the subaltern nervously, "but we dumped out all the leaves, and there wasn't anything hidden in the cart."

The general scowled and appeared to be still unconvinced.

"Just who was present when it came in?" resumed O'Rourke.

"All of us."

III

O'ROURKE was remembering that surreptitious football, accompanied by a rustling of leaves, that he had heard out on the balcony a moment after admitting the girl to his room.

It obviously hadn't been the general floundering after her in pursuit, as he had thought at the time, or he would have come all the way to O'Rourke's window himself. It hadn't been any third party leaving the room either, because she had just left it herself and there had been no one in there but the general.

That meant it must have been someone entering, by clambering up one of the balcony supports from below, using the thick vine-tendrils that twined around them for footrests. Not a very difficult feat, in any case.

A moment after he had entered, Ricardo had knocked on the door. The interrupted intruder, who hadn't counted on this, must have retreated to the darkened balcony once more, waited out there until he left, and then re-entered.

But this time the general had roused from his drunken torpor and had to be swiftly silenced with that knife the girl had left behind. With a sentry supposedly within hearing the intruder couldn't risk using any other means.

The point was, if his theoretical reconstruction was accurate, the murderer-to-be had spent a good five minutes on the balcony waiting for Ricardo to clear out of the room.

O'Rourke strolled out there to look it over. Practically the whole army had been in and out of the bedroom by this time, but as far as he knew no one had been on the balcony since the night before.

It was floored in red tile. A cast-iron railing loaded with vine leaves ran along one side of it, the whitewashed plaster wall of the hotel along the other side. A couple of lazy bottle-flies were droning about over the leaves. There must be caterpillars at work somewhere around too; there seemed to be traces.

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He bent closer, peering at the leaves, handling them. He dropped down and went painstakingly over the tiled flooring, picking up something here and there. Not caterpillars; who ever heard of expectorating caterpillars?

He straightened up, strode back into the room, blurted out: "Who chews leaves in your army?"

Escobar looked insulted. "What do you think we are, cows?"

"Don't pass it off like that. There must be somebody who does. You men have been together throughout the entire campaign. You've had a chance to notice each other's little traits and habits, day by day. You ought to be able to answer that."

The general scratched the middle of his forehead. Then the back of his head. Then the side. "Leaves? Leaves?" He groped. "I don't know about leaves. Sometimes I've seen Pablito, that's our quartermaster, stand before me waiting for orders with a blade of grass between his teeth."

Someone else in the room nodded, said: "That's right. I was up in a tree with him once, observing the enemy's position, and he kept pulling off leaves and chewing them the whole time we were up there."

O'Rourke opened his palm, showed them little tattered fragments, almost like confetti, he'd picked up on the balcony floor. They followed him outside; he pointed out the ripped ends on some of the leaves still on the vine, jagged tears such as no insect would have the strength to make.

They were all only in one small area, just to one side of the general's window embrasure.

ESCOBAR couldn't see anything in it. "That's nothing," he said. "He must have been up here earlier, to apply for a little furlough. He went home last night, you know."

"Did he apply for his furlough out on the balcony?" O'Rourke asked.

"No, he couldn't have," admitted the general, kneading the back of his neck perplexedly. "I just remembered, we hadn't found out how to open those windows yet. You have to pull up that long rod that goes into a socket in the floor. We all took turns trying to kick them open. Finally one of the waiters came up and showed us, but that was long after."

"What more do you want? Doesn't that show he came back later and climbed up the outside? Those tattered leaves are out on the balcony, not in here where he and the rest of you were earlier. Pablito's your man."

He saw he hadn't convinced them. They weren't used to taking trivial things like tattered leaves into account. Concrete things like who had been in a room last and whom a knife belonged to, were all their minds were used to grasping. He kept hammering away at them.

"Had the money been brought in before he left?"

"Yes. His horse was all saddled, but he came up a minute to take a look at it before starting."

"And were the windows open by that time?"

"Yes, the *mozo* had just finished showing us how they worked."

"So he knew the money was already up here. And he knew he could get in through the balcony, even if there was a sentry outside the door. The rank and file didn't know anything about this money coming in. And of your staff members who did, who else is away on leave today?"

"Only him," admitted Escobar unwillingly. "You see, he came from around here originally. His home town's Tlaxco, just across the mountain, so naturally he wanted to go back and look up old friends while we were campaigning this close by."

"Yeah, sure," said O'Rourke drily.

The general didn't want to give in. "But he left long before it happened," he argued. "The money was in here already by ten-thirty, and that's when he started out. You said yourself my brother didn't die until one-ten."

That lousy wristwatch gag, which had made such a big splash in his favor in the beginning, was now an obstacle. "How do you know he didn't hang around the out-

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skirts of town for the next few hours, then come back again, probably on foot, when you were all asleep?"

Escobar mulled this over broodingly. Suddenly he came to a decision. "Well, there's an easy enough way to find out for sure. It all depends on what time he showed up in Tlaxco. It's an all-night ride. If he left here when he seemed to, at 10.30, he'd get there by eight or nine in the morning. But if he didn't leave until you say he did, past one, the earliest he could get there would be noon. I know that road well."

He motioned forward one of the noncoms. "Espinosa, take another man with you, ride down to Tlaxco, and find out what time he reached there. Don't take his word for it, ask others."

O'Rourke said, "I'm going to be the other man he takes with him. I believe in getting my evidence at first hand."

"Can you ride?" the general asked doubtfully. "It's a ten-hour trip."

"Sure I can ride, I used to be a mounted cop on Lenox Avenue. How far away is the place?"

"About fifty miles."

"Then why should it take that long?"

"Because you can't go in a straight line." Escobar led him to the window. "See that baldheaded mountain there, standing straight up before you? El Pico Pelado we call it. The top is bare rock, no horse can get up over it. The trail has to go all the way around the base to get across to the other side. It more than doubles the riding distance."

"I'm still going," muttered O'Rourke doggedly. "I want your word, General, that you won't do anything to that Pascal kid until I get back."

"Why not?" The general shrugged amiably. "If Pablito killed my brother and stole the campaign funds, he's the one gets shot. I'll wait until I find out for sure."

THEY saddled the late general's own personal mount for O'Rourke, and he and this Espinosa started out at once. The archaic Ford couldn't be used because the Tlaxco road narrowed in places to a one-abreast defile, was impassable for anything on wheels.

It felt good to be on a horse again—at first anyway. The going was easy for a while—just a wide dirt road out of the town—although the dust was tough and the sun was tougher.

Then it started to tilt little by little in front of them and narrow down, and from then on it was a steady upgrade. A small but rapid little stream suddenly turned in from nowhere and ran downward past them.

When they had progressed about a third of the distance up the looming height before them, they came upon its source, a slender but high-powered waterfall pouring perpendicularly down from some hidden spring high up near the top. A small amphitheater of large flat stones formed a natural pool at its base.

The mountain, which until now had been simply an inclined plane, thrust up vertically before them from this point on, abrupt as a cliff. The road, blocked, swerved aside and started that long loop around it the general had spoken of. It continued to climb, but in a spiral, like a trackless scenic railway—and just about as narrow.

They dismounted by the foam-lathered pool, watered their horses, filled their canteens, and smoked a cigarette apiece before going on. "No more water until Tlaxco now," grunted Espinosa.

"Wonder where it comes from?" O'Rourke said, craning his neck. "There's no snow on top of the peak to feed it."

Espinosa shrugged.

"*Quién sabe?* From inside somewhere. They say the Aztecs had a mine drilled into this mountain. Then when the Spaniards came, they didn't want them to find it, so they prayed to the mountain gods and—*fsht!* Water started to pour out of the mine bore, just like that. Foolishness!" he pronounced contemptuously.

"Don't take much stock in local superstitions, eh?" O'Rourke suggested.

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"Anything that isn't in Marx' *Das Kapital,* isn't true," was the somewhat startling answer he got on this.

They remounted and rode on. They had to go single file now, and they had to cut out the galloping. The mountainside was almost perpendicular on one side of them, and a steadily lengthening drop down into space was on the other.

They had left Zacamoras at ten that morning. It was well after dark before they finally made Tlaxco. The place was Zacamoras all over again,—same plaza, same arcades, same church. They asked directions and the house of Pablito's married sister was pointed out.

They knocked and an Indian woman came to the door, her hands all mealy from kneading tortillas.

"Pablito here?"

"My brother's been down at the *cantina* all day."

"We'd like to come in and look around."

She stepped readily aside. The bare-walled, dirt-floored rooms had nothing to hide and nothing to reveal.

"When did he get here?"

"At daybreak."

O'Rourke and his companion exchanged a long look. "You lose," Espinosa finally murmured under his breath.

"I never know when to give up," answered the American. "They're all his relatives in this house; they'd go to bat for him anyway. Where's his horse?" he asked the woman.

"Out in back."

He went out there to take a look at it, Espinosa at his heels.

"This the same one he rode out of Zacamoras?"

Espinosa peered at it in the dark. "Yes, I recognize it by the white star on its forehead."

O'Rourke bent down, felt its legs and examined its hoofs. "Doesn't seem in bad shape. How did he do it?"

(*Please turn the page*)

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"The answer apparently is that he left when he seemed to, and didn't have to force it any."

THE American snapped one word. "Apparently." He moved over to a line stretched between two poles, fingered the saddle, blanket, and other equipment hanging on it. They were biscuit-dry after being out in the hot sun all day. He carried his question back inside to the woman.

"His horse stumbled and fell to its knees with him, when he stopped to water it at that mountain pool on the way. His things were still a little damp, so I thought I'd better see they got dried out."

Espinosa answered O'Rourke's questioning look. "It could happen. I've often stayed in the saddle myself at that place and let my horse wade in. Come on; there's nothing else this place can show us. Let's go look him up."

They found him, as she had said, in the *cantina* or local tavern; relating his campaign experiences to a circle of spellbound listeners and being very much of a hero. He didn't show any fear at sight of Espinosa, just the right amount of cordial surprise. "What are *you* doing down here?"

"Report back with me to Escobar. The funds have disappeared and his brother was knifed to death. You're wanted for questioning."

Pablito looked hurt. "That's a fine thing. So my own superior thinks I could do a thing like that." He gave himself a couple of wallops on the chest. "After I've sweated through the whole campaign with him, that's gratitude for you." He eyed O'Rourke malevolently. "Where does this gringo come in?"

O'Rourke took over personally at this point, being a firm believer in having suspects answer the questions and not ask them. "I hear you got in at daylight. Anyone see you—outside of your own relatives, that is?"

"Ask anyone in town," Pablito said sultrily.

They did. O'Rourke saw to it that they did. They combed the town, and all they got was affirmation. Even the *alcalde* was a witness in his behalf. "He had breakfast with me. He stopped by my house to say hello, and I insisted that he sit down with me. And I've never breakfasted later than 6.30 in my life. If there's any question about it, I'll ride back there and testify in his behalf," he offered staunchly.

They were all his fellow townspeople, O'Rourke knew. Still, would the whole town come to his defense as one man? He could fix one witness, or even two, but could he fix the whole town? The thing had him stopped.

IV

AFTER spending the night at the *alcalde's* house, they started back the following morning. Pablito insisted on bringing one of his witnesses back. He picked a good one, too. The *alcalde*.

The defendant and his star witness rode in the lead, Espinosa and O'Rourke behind them. A short distance out of Tlaxco they passed under a row of trees growing close by the road. Pablito absent-mindedly snatched at a branch hanging low as he went by, pulled off a handful of leaves, began to nibble them.

O'Rourke's eyes narrowed and bored into the quartermaster's back, but he didn't say anything. The thing didn't have him stopped any more; just held up.

When they got to the pool at the foot of the cascade and stopped to water their horses, O'Rourke signaled surreptitiously to Espinosa to stay in his saddle. Then he watched closely to see what Pablito would do. He was the only one of the four to dismount.

"Horse slipped and ducked me headfirst into there yesterday," he explained unasked. "I'm not taking any more chances."

O'Rourke leaned over his horse's head and scowled down at his own reflection in the quivering water. The guy was airtight on all sides.

It was late afternoon by the time they

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reached Zacamoras. "Well?" snapped the general to Espinosa, when they'd reported upstairs to his room.

"He got there at daylight. Everyone in the place says so, and the *alcalde* has made the trip back with us specially to testify to that effect. There was no sign of the money bags down there anywhere."

Escobar gave the American a disgusted look. "*Hnh,*" he snorted. Pablito just stood there with his arms folded, a complacent expression on his face, like a man who has been much abused but is willing to overlook it.

"Wait out there on the balcony a minute," O'Rourke ordered him. He closed the windows behind him after he'd gone out.

"What did you have him do that for?" Escobar asked.

"I'll show you. Just let him stay out there by himself a couple of minutes." He waited a short while, then motioned the general.

"Take a squint out at him through the glass. You do it yourself. Don't open the window; just peep out without letting him see you. What's he doing?"

"Nothing." Escobár turned away again blankly. "Just standing there, nibbling on a leaf."

O'Rourke brought his hand down flat on the table before him, not violently but firmly. "Once more I tell you this is the guy that killed your brother, whatever time he rode into Tlaxco."

"And I say no man can get from here to Tlaxco between 1:10 in the morning and 5:30. It's humanly impossible," retorted the general.

He wasn't wasting any more time. "Attention, corporal. Pick four men for a firing squad, take the prisoner Pascal out, stand him against the wall of the prison courtyard, and shoot him immediately. As for the hiding place of the money, we can find that out from the girl afterwards; there are ways and ways. I'm ashamed of myself for listening to this gringo and waiting so long. He should have been dead already by now."

O'Rourke said, "Listen to me, will you. . ."

"I've listened to you long enough. You got my order, corporal. Carry it out, and report back as soon as you have."

"*Si, mi general.*" The corporal saluted, turned on his heel.

"Wait, will you?" O'Rourke groaned. "Don't be in such a hurry. I tell you you're letting this guy get away with murder."

The corporal had reached the doorway already, was about to step through it. "Can *you* ride between here and Tlaxco in four and a half hours or better?" the general demanded.

There was no choice in the matter. He had to talk fast, for the corporal was over the threshold by now. "Sure I can," O'Rourke said. "I'll show you I can. Only call him back, cancel that execution order."

A roar of laughter went up. The general made pinwheels at the side of his head to show he thought O'Rourke was crazy. He brought his fist crashing down on the table before him. "*Bueno!* You ride from here to Tlaxco, between one A. M. and dawn, and I will be convinced that Pablito did it. If not, we shoot the Pascal boy."

"That's a bargain." O'Rourke was in for it now; there wasn't much else he could say. If they'd watched his Adam's apple they would have seen it fluctuate above his collar.

"You want anyone to ride with you, American?"

"No. There's an old saying with us, 'He travels fastest who travels alone.' Just send someone down ahead to time me, that's all."

"I'll go," volunteered Espinosa, sympathetically. "He'll never make it in a hundred years, but he's got nerve for even trying at all. I'll start now. Good luck, Oruke."

"I'm going to need it," thought O'Rourke glumly. It was hopeless, a physical impossibility; he knew that already. The most it was getting him was a twenty-four-hour stay on the boy's life. There

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was something phony about the way Pablito had accomplished it, but how was he to find out what it was in time? He'd been over the road for the first time in his life yesterday, and Pablito had been brought up around here, knew every inch of the ground by heart.

Escobar speared a warning forefinger at him. "And if you show up in Tlaxco any later than five-thirty in the morning—you know the answer." He mimicked sighting a rifle. *"Boom!"*

"Boom is right," thought O'Rourke.

HE went back to his own room, rested up for the ordeal ahead, and reported back to the general a few minutes before one in the morning. He still ached all over from the two days' strenuous riding he'd already put in. But the point was, he could get over aching, young Pascál couldn't get over being shot.

A fresh horse was furnished him; they weren't stingy about that. He didn't even bother looking it over. He knew speed and endurance would play no part in this anyway; they couldn't possibly. There were stretches of that defile where no horse could go any faster than a slow walk.

He packed a battery light with him. It seemed a forlorn hope to expect its feeble rays to reveal some possible bypass or short cut along the way, when he'd failed to detect a single one in the full light of the glaring sun.

They had all come out on the balcony to give him the starting gun, so to speak. They were enjoying themselves hugely at his expense, especially Pablito. O'Rourke thrust out his jaw, mounted.

"Not yet," the general called down warningly. "You have five minutes yet. You leave at exactly one-ten as he did, according to what you say." He had obtained an everyday kitchen alarm clock from somewhere, was holding it up by the nipple of the bell, pointing to it.

"I give him those extra five minutes, I make him a present of them," Pablito jeered.

O'Rourke countered with a suggestion of his own as to what Pablito could do with them.

An old Indian woman sidled up to him out of the surrounding darkness, furtively pressed something into his hand. It was the little jet cross on a gold chain he had seen Luisa Pascal wearing. "The *señorita* heard. She sends you this for a *relicario*. She will pray for your success all night long."

He took the talisman, and smiled.

"Tell her now I surely can't go wrong," he murmured, with more assurance than he felt.

"Start!" bellowed the general across the balcony rail. "Ten after one *en punto!*"

O'ROURKE wheeled his horse and set out at a leisurely canter down the dark Tlaxco mountain road. The lights of the Plaza blinked out behind him.

He paced along even more slowly than he and Espinosa had yesterday morning. He bracketed all the possibilities there were, while his horse's hoofbeats thudded a rhythmic accompaniment.

A short cut over the mountain, in the straightest possible line between the two places.

A short cut around the opposite side of it, to the right instead of to the left.

A short cut down along the floor of the ravine between the mountain and its neighbor, instead of along the sky-trail clinging halfway up its side.

None of them was any good at all. The first two were physical impossibilities; the third was not a short cut at all, but a longer, far more roundabout way.

The offside stream showed up, murmuring plaintively in the night silence. "How did he do it?" he thought desperately. "I've got to get it soon. If I wait until I'm too far along, it'll be too late to help."

When he reached the waterfall he dismounted a minute, to water his horse and have a drink for himself. The animal overstepped the nearest of the flat slabs, stood with its forelegs in the pool. O'Rourke caught it, pulled it back over the brink.

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"Come out of there, I don't want to ride on a wet saddle the rest of the way like he did," he muttered. But the girths and lower edge of the saddle were already soaked.

Heavy-hearted with a sense of impending failure, he remounted and started off up the precarious sky-trail.

He pulled his pocket light out, held it trained steadily against the mountain wall on his right as he rode aolng. But all it showed was inaccessible rock, with an occasional little stunted shrub growing out of a fissure where some soil had collected. If there'd been anything that offered a ghost of a foothold up, he would have seen it yesterday in the sunlight.

He let his horse falter to a dead stop, clicked the light off, reclamped it to his waist. It was going to be like this all the rest of the way, so there was no use going any further. He took out a cigarette and a sulphur-headed match, absent-mindedly stroked it along the lower part of his saddle.

It shouldn't have flared, but it did. That had been wet less than five minutes ago; he remembered it now. He reached down, tested it with his fingers. Riding in the dry mountain night air had already dried it. And the horse's coat as well.

He threw the cigarette away unused, straightened alertly in his saddle. Pablito's equipment had been damp enough when he got in for his sister to notice it—and he'd been riding for hours. O'Rourke had only just come away from the pool and his saddle was already dry. Something didn't check there.

Espinosa's chance remark came back to him. "There's a story the Aztecs used to have a mine drilled into that mountain."

His eyes narrowed in the dark. He turned his horse about, gave it a decisive whack on the rump, went careening back the way he had just come. The pool—that was the only place along the whole route where there was the slightest variation in the looks of the surroundings. And it was the point where the detour began. Up to there, no mileage was wasted.

And yet as he drew up, dismounted, and carefully played his light all over the place, he couldn't see anything that would help. The rock wall here was sheerer than anywhere else, if possible. The waterfall fell with absolute plumb-line straightness.

V

O'ROURKE kicked off his shoes, rolled his trousers above the knees, and stepped into the pool, playing his light down as he advanced. He could see the bottom without any trouble. It was solid rock, hollowed out and worn smooth by the water.

He kept on toward the waterfall until it spattered his shoulders, blew a fine curtain of spray down all around him. He shielded his eyes with one hand, forced his light beam through it, turning it glittering white. Another big solid slab of rock behind it.

He circled around it to the side, pressed up against the rock wall, and aimed his light at it from that angle. There was a big fissure there, a fault in that upright slab that stood directly under the waterfall.

He moved in close, nearly blinded by the water tattooing on his head. His idea was simply to explore the aperture with his hand, although it was obviously too narrow to admit even a man, much less a horse.

But at the first touch of his fingers he could detect a distinct vibration, as if the upright slab were so finely balanced that even the downbeating water was enough to jar it. He swung at it, and to his surprise the fissure widened alarmingly, almost effortlessly.

There was an opening there, under this thin, screen-like slab. And the slab, huge as it was in diameter, was resting on so small a segment of its circumference that it could be swiveled a considerable distance without any undue effort. Only, as it came out now, it dislocated the waterfall and caused a terrific counterspray up above to shoot out at right angles.

He got his shoulders in under it, taking a chance on being crushed to death by the

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slab suddenly swinging back. He shot the light ahead of him. One glance was enough to show him that here was a definite cave. And a second glance revealed the distinct imprint of a horse's hoof on the moist, clayey floor.

If Pablito's horse had gone in there, his could too.

He drew back, climbed out, and led the horse into the pool after him. It balked as soon as he got it over close enough to feel the impact of the falling water. He had to get behind and crowd it forward.

To make matters worse, the downbeat of the water had once more battened back the delicately poised slab into place. He had to hold the rebellious horse by foreshortened bridle with one hand, claw the teetering obstruction out at the end of its arc once more with the other.

There was a short swift struggle. Either Pablito had to go through this too, or else his horse was more accustomed to squirming in through this watery trap. The animal finally scented dryness and security ahead, thrust his head and neck in, and the rest was easy. It was a fairly tight squeeze, but the horse made it; and O'Rourke himself had no trouble at all.

Within a matter of moments the beat of the water outside had tilted the jittery touchstone back into place. The din of the waterfall quieted to a low, steady drone. O'Rourke and horse both shook themselves free of the excess drops of water clinging all over them.

He could understand now why Pablito had remained damp all the way to his sister's house; he hadn't ridden in the open from here on.

HE replaced his shoes, which he had slung over his saddle joined together by their laces, and looked around.

He could tell at a glance that the place was not a natural formation. It had been hewn by hand out of the living rock hundreds of years before. He trained his torch upward, and saw immediately that there could be no question of remounting. The rock roof was too low. He'd have to go first and lead the horse after him, as Pablito must have done.

As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for those prints he had detected, which were proof positive that Pablito had preceded him through here and lived to come out somewhere on the Tlaxco side of the mountain, he wouldn't have liked the looks of the undertaking any too much. Almost immediately beyond the mouth the passage narrowed down uncomfortably on all four sides. The bore slanted downward, into the very bowels of the mountain, at a grade that was none too easy to maintain footing on. He was subject to the constant risk of having his horse catapulted down on top of him; only the width of its hips, zig-zagging from side to side, served as a sort of brake on it.

The roof and sides were supported every few feet by age-blackened cross timbers, but the fissures that showed above and around them didn't inspire confidence. And even as close as he still was to the entrance, the air was none too good; was already close and stiffling.

But Pablito had come out alive.

He played his light ahead down the inclined chute as he went. His horse was nervous and unhappy, with neck held stiffly foreshortened the way it was obliged to, and he didn't blame it. The lack of ventilation was growing more noticeable all the time, and as the dampness around the entrance disappeared, they began to raise an age-old fine dust that tickled the nostrils and throat irritatingly. Sweat started out on his face and body from the closeness.

The bore reached a level plane at last, but there were various elbows and shifts of direction to be met with in it, and several times it opened up into wider cubicles, each one containing a black shaft. These were evidently the ancient diggings themselves. Once his horse shied violently, and he picked up a skeleton in the far corner with his light. One of the old Indian mine workers, or some more recent intruder like himself, trapped down here and asphyxiated? It didn't put him in a

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happier frame of mind. Suddenly, straight ahead, what he had been subconsciously dreading all along presented itself to view. The tunnel forked in two, with both branches dead alike, nothing to tell one from the other. This was no time, the way his lungs were clamoring for air, to take the wrong one. By the time he found out and got back to the fork, it might be too late.

HE stopped dead, chewed his lips, rolled his torch all about the double entrance. The hoofprints of Pablito's horse might have been able to tell him, but he hadn't been able to pick up any lately; the flooring was bare rock this far in.

He couldn't stand there all night trying to make up his mind either; he was getting dizzy from lack of oxygen.

Suddenly he happened to glance up directly overhead. There was a dab of white chalk over the entrance on the right. He grinned as he understood. There must have been a first time for Pablito to work his way through here too.

Only he had probably come through from the Tlaxco side that first time. He hadn't taken any chances; he'd marked the one he'd just emerged from, so he'd know it when he started back. And the mark had stayed there ever since.

"Thanks, pal," O'Rourke muttered, and staggered uncertainly into the entrance to the right.

CONFIRMATION came minutes later; and by that time he was already seeing black specks dancing in front of his eyes from the exertion of the upgrade and the lack of air.

Confirmation was another of those vestibules or loading platforms hollowed out around the passage; and in this one, sitting snugly over in the corner, were the twin money bags that had disappeared from the murdered general's hotel room two nights before.

"Got you now!" he muttered. "If this place doesn't get me first."

He slung the money bags around his saddle horn, nearly fell over beneath their weight, and shuffled on down the interminable shaft, one hand out against its sides now to keep himself erect. The last few minutes he was swaying from side to side like a drunk, while his horse's breathing sounded asthmatically behind him.

His tongue was hanging out of his mouth by this time and his eyes were protruding from their sockets. Abruptly his light flattened out against what seemed to be a solid barrier of rock face to face with him, as if the shaft had come to a dead end.

He toppled down on all fours before it and started to shove with his shoulders and back. It wouldn't move; either he was too weak to be able to throw any strength or it was as solid as it looked.

The chalk mark back there may have misled him. Pablito might have put it up not to show the way out, but to show which passage the money was secreted in; and the actual way out might be through the other one.

If that was the case, he was finished now; he'd never be able to get back to the fork, much less retrace his steps along the second branch. He did what he'd heard of mariners doing to detect wind direction; wet his finger and held it up.

A slight coolness hit it on the side toward the rock barrier staring him in the face. A crack through which air was seeping didn't mean he could get out; it might only mean a slower death from thirst and hunger in a day or two.

He jockeyed his horse forward, brought its shoulder up against the barrier, hit it a couple of whacks with his open hand. The horse, trying to shy away from him, exerted more pressure than he had been able to. A lot of dust and small stones rained down around them, as if something had opened momentarily and closed again.

He tried a second time. Suddenly the whole barrier went out at a sixty-degree angle, stayed that way. This time a regular curtain of dirt and gravel streamed down. When it had thinned out again he clambered up over the thing and found himself out in the open. It was harder to get the

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horse up but he finally managed, after it had skidded back inside two or three times.

He breathed deeply before he even looked around. There was no waterfall here to screen the exit; but a tangled thicket, almost of jungle luxuriance, served the same purpose.

He saw what had happened. The thin slab of solid rock he'd just dislodged was meant to be no more difficult to tilt than its mate at the other end; but since Pablito had last come through and replaced it, one of those minor landslides of loose earth and stones had come down and all but cemented it in.

There was no sign of the road, so he guessed that he'd come out somewhere beyond Tlaxco. To reach it he'd have to go back a short distance. But there were still stars over him, the sky was only just beginning to pale in the East, and he'd made it; that was all that mattered.

VI

ESPINOSA was sleeping in the same room in the *alcalde's* house that the two of them had shared the night before when O'Rourke strode in, shook him vigorously awake. "Clock me!" he shouted with a defiant grin. "I just got in."

Espinosa stared unbelievingly at the clock set out in readiness across the room, which he hadn't expected to use for hours yet. "Five-thirty in the morning! H-how did you do it?"

"The same way he did. Get up; we're starting back."

"What're you made of, iron? You just got in!"

"I know, but I'm not taking any chances, Pablito may try to talk the general into executing young Pascal without waiting for us to get back, and if I'm any judge, the general executes awfully easily."

. . . The afternoon sun was already on the downgrade when they rode back into Zacamoras. The reception committee was noticeably missing from the general's balcony as they dismounted under it, but they didn't think anything of that.

O'Rourke pushed into the room upstairs ahead of his companion. There was no one there; neither the general, nor Pablito, nor any of the usual retinue. A foot soldier answered his alarmed question when they'd gone chasing below again.

"He's over at the prison supervising an execution."

"That doublecrossing Pablito talked him into this," bellowed O'Rourke. "And not a telephone line in the town! If they've shot that kid, after all I went through—"

Probably no one had ever run through the hot, lazy streets that fast since the town was founded. Espinosa was blocks behind by the time the sprinting O'Rourke reached the barred main entrance to the low, adobe prison building. A woman in black was huddled there on her knees; pressed despairingly up against it. She turned a stricken face toward him.

It was Luisa Pascal. "Listen—the roll of the drums has begun already—"

O'Rourke battered frantically at the wooden doors with his gun butt. A frightened, cinnamon-colored sentry peered out at him. "No admission, by the general's order. There is an exe—"

O'Rourke corkscrewed his .38 around into the sentry's abdomen like an awl, thrust him back out of the way. The rolling of the drums rose to a crescendo. Through them pierced a sharp-voiced command like the crack of a whip. "Ready!"

He hurtled down the broad corridor that led through to the courtyard at the back. The second command had already sounded before he got to it. "Take aim!"

O'Rourke burst out into the open, yelled at the top of his lungs "Down, Pascal—*down flat!*" It was the only way to save him. The blindfolded figure standing there alone against the far wall flung himself face forward to the ground, lay there prone.

O'Rourke leveled his gun at the leg of the commanding officer standing there to one side of the squad, pulled the trigger.

"Fi—!" The man crumpled forward. A volley of musketry rang out, thudded harmlessly into the empty adobe wall.

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O'ROURKE strode over to where Escobar stood, with Pablito and a select few grouped around him, taking it in. "You gave me your word," he flared hotly. "This is your man, standing right at your elbow. He rode through an old Indian tunnel under the mountain. I found the money-bags there to prove it. Ask Espinosa what time I—"

Escobar turned accusingly. But Pablito was no longer beside him; had streaked across the courtyard and was just about to gain the entrance.

"Gimme that!" the general snarled, and pulled O'Rourke's still smoking gun out of his hand. He dropped the fleeing quartermaster in the exact center of the courtyard entrance.

"He talked me into it," Escobar said indignantly. "He kept saying you'd never make it, so there didn't seem to be any harm in going ahead." He darted a resentful after-glance at the huddled figure, hitched the gun up once more. "Is he dead yet?"

"He's stone dead, my General," one of the men reported admiringly.

"Give these two a safe conduct to the opposition's outposts," suggested O'Rourke. The girl had come in, was hovering anxiously over her brother.

"Sure, why not?" said the general. He felt in good humor again, as long as he had shot someone after all. Then as he laboriously scratched an X at the bottom of the safe conduct, O'Rourke couldn't resist saying, "Remind me sometime to teach you how to sign your name."

The girl had come timidly over to him. "How can I ever thank you, *señor?*" she faltered, clasping his hand between both of hers.

"I don't want thanks," remonstrated O'Rourke, wrinkling his forehead at her. "You don't thank a duck for swimming or a bird for flying, do you? I just don't know any different, that's all. That's my job; that's why they call me flatfoot."

He paused, and for the first time in his life felt a shy embarrassment, mixed with certain other emotions which he did not venture to define. He reached into a pocket and drew forth a little jet cross on a gold chain.

"Yours," he said. "It helped, you know."

He saw only Luisa's smile; felt only her soft hand closing on his own, folding it over the amulet. "Please," she said, "please you keep it for me—"Señor Flatfoot."

MR. WRIGHT FOUND OUT HE WAS WRONG!
MR. WRIGHT: Gee, this stuff is awful! Why do all laxatives taste so bad?
MRS. WRIGHT: All of them don't. Ex-Lax tastes like delicious chocolate.
MR. W.: Ex-Lax? That's O.K. for you and Junior, but I need something stronger!
MRS. W.: No, you don't! Ex-Lax is just as effective as any bad-tasting cathartic.
LATER
MR. W.: I sure am glad I took your advice. It's Ex-Lax for me from now on.
MRS. W.: Yes, with Ex-Lax in the house we don't need any other laxative!
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
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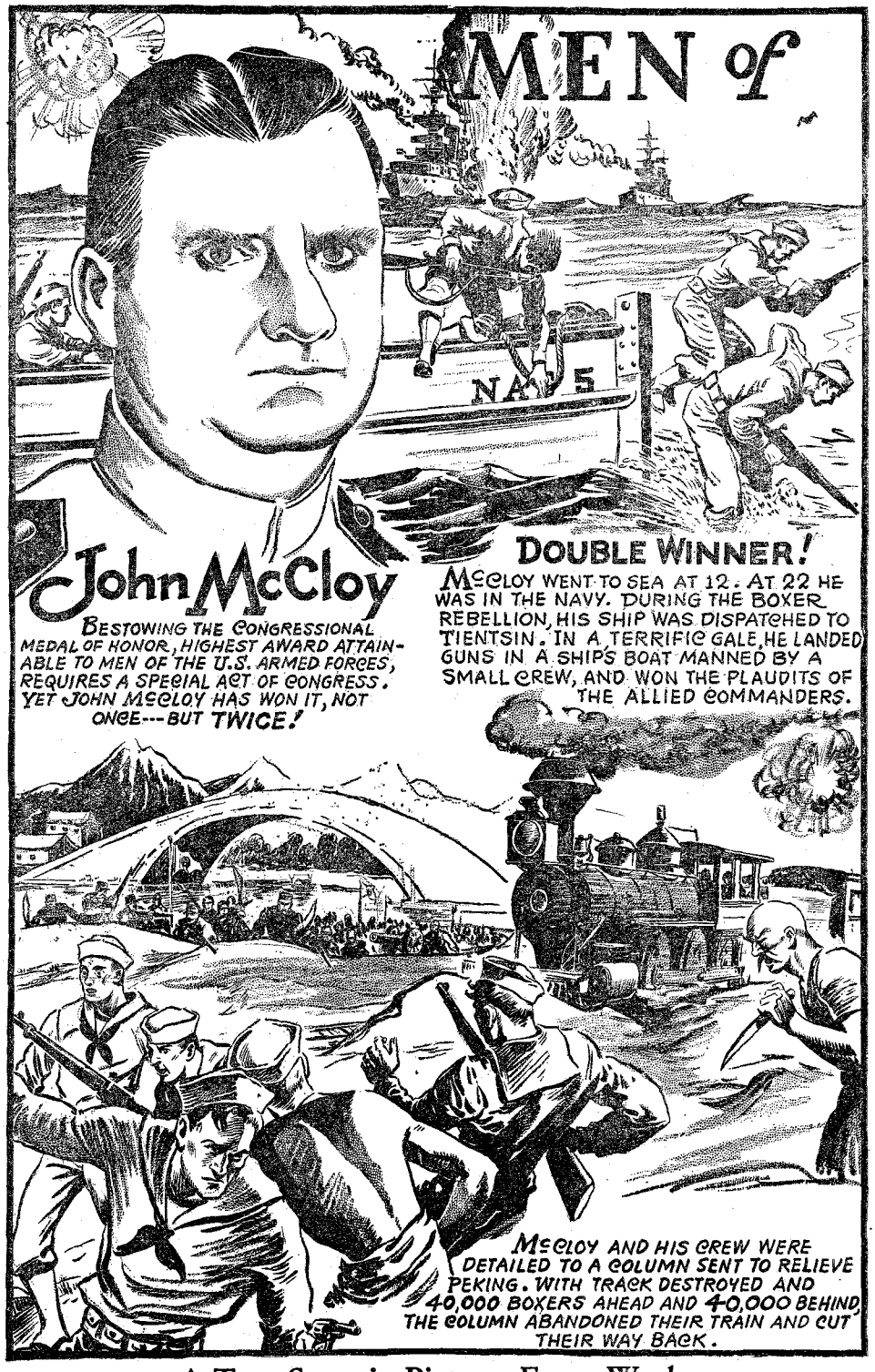
MEN of
John McCloy
BESTOWING THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR, HIGHEST AWARD ATTAINABLE TO MEN OF THE U.S. ARMED FORCES, REQUIRES A SPECIAL ACT OF CONGRESS. YET JOHN McCLOY HAS WON IT, NOT ONCE---BUT TWICE!
DOUBLE WINNER!
McCLOY WENT TO SEA AT 12. AT 22 HE WAS IN THE NAVY. DURING THE BOXER REBELLION, HIS SHIP WAS DISPATCHED TO TIENTSIN. IN A TERRIFIC GALE, HE LANDED GUNS IN A SHIP'S BOAT MANNED BY A SMALL CREW, AND WON THE PLAUDITS OF THE ALLIED COMMANDERS.
McCLOY AND HIS CREW WERE DETAILED TO A COLUMN SENT TO RELIEVE PEKING. WITH TRACK DESTROYED AND 40,000 BOXERS AHEAD AND 40,000 BEHIND, THE COLUMN ABANDONED THEIR TRAIN AND CUT THEIR WAY BACK.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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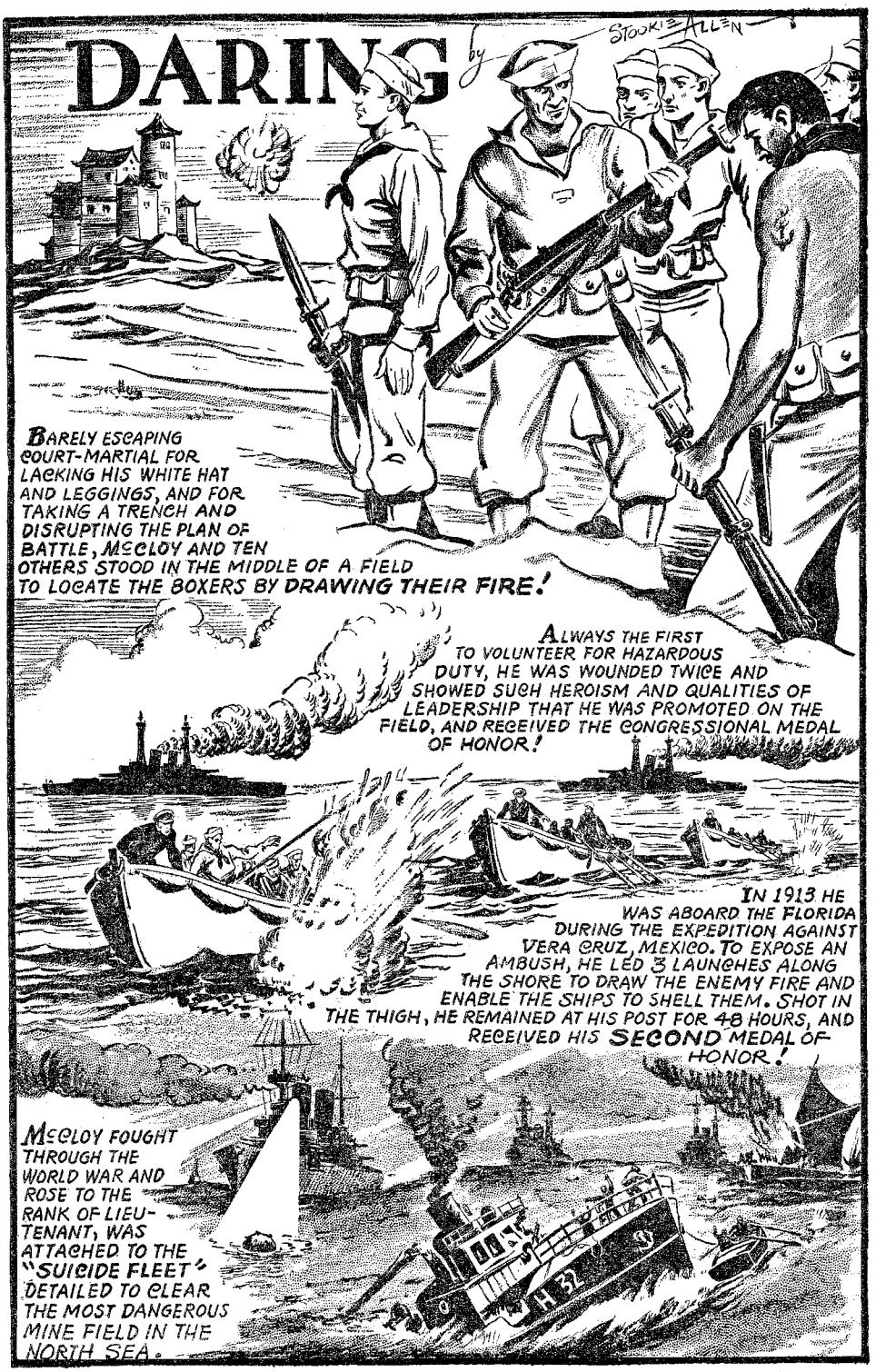
DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
BARELY ESCAPING COURT-MARTIAL FOR LACKING HIS WHITE HAT AND LEGGINGS, AND FOR TAKING A TRENCH AND DISRUPTING THE PLAN OF BATTLE, McCLOY AND TEN OTHERS STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIELD TO LOCATE THE BOXERS BY DRAWING THEIR FIRE!
ALWAYS THE FIRST TO VOLUNTEER FOR HAZARDOUS DUTY, HE WAS WOUNDED TWICE AND SHOWED SUCH HEROISM AND QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP THAT HE WAS PROMOTED ON THE FIELD, AND RECEIVED THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR!
IN 1913 HE WAS ABOARD THE FLORIDA DURING THE EXPEDITION AGAINST VERA CRUZ, MEXICO. TO EXPOSE AN AMBUSH, HE LED 3 LAUNCHES ALONG THE SHORE TO DRAW THE ENEMY FIRE AND ENABLE THE SHIPS TO SHELL THEM. SHOT IN THE THIGH, HE REMAINED AT HIS POST FOR 48 HOURS, AND RECEIVED HIS SECOND MEDAL OF HONOR!
McCLOY FOUGHT THROUGH THE WORLD WAR AND ROSE TO THE RANK OF LIEUTENANT, WAS ATTACHED TO THE "SUICIDE FLEET" DETAILED TO CLEAR THE MOST DANGEROUS MINE FIELD IN THE NORTH SEA.
A 32

Coming soon: Mike Mahoney—King of the Klondike

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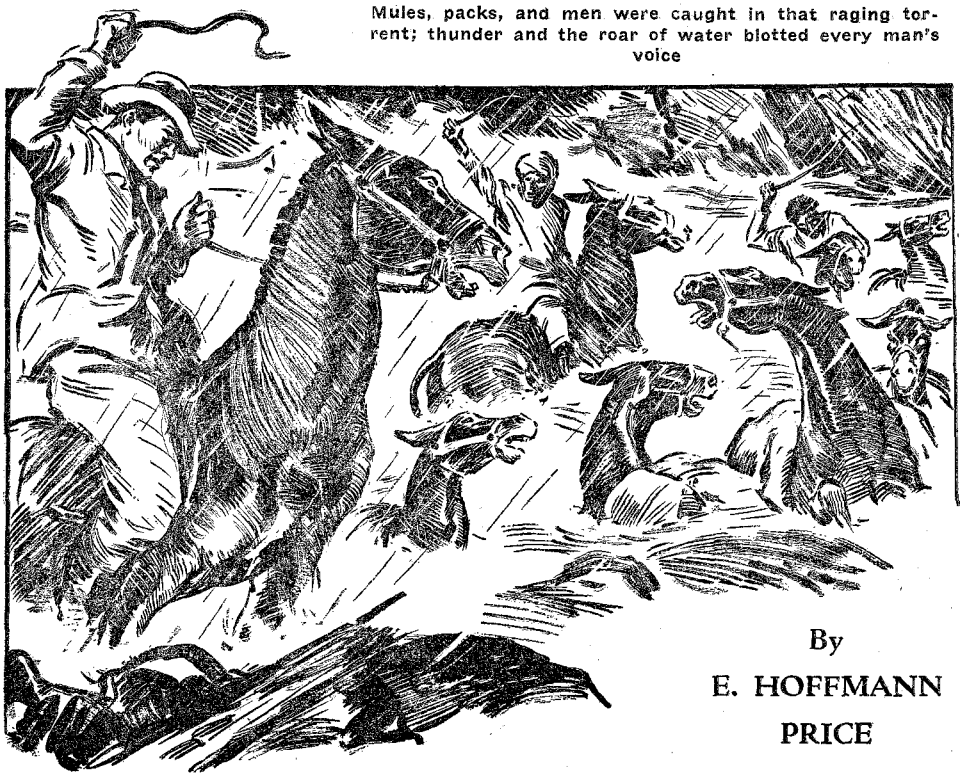

Mules, packs, and men were caught in that raging torrent; thunder and the roar of water blotted every man's voice

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Message for McTavish

Go to the Abyssinian, thou sluggard, for an illustrated lesson in taking grief and liking it. Here's an astonishing story of how one unofficial carrier got through with the mail—and something more important

THOUGH Layne was used to quitting, spectators still embarrassed him; particularly before he had prepared a convincing story. So he stood there, tall and lean and bronzed, and cracked his knuckles by spreading, then clenching his fingers.

McTavish, the one white man he despised, was riding down the trail toward the trading post, and there was no avoiding him.

From the gate of the trading post, which was perched high on the slope of the Tcher-Tcher Mountains, Layne could see the ruddy haze that hid Harar and the coffee plantations, thirty miles away and three thousand feet below. And just about that distance beyond Harar was Diré Dawa and the railroad which would take Layne out of Ethiopia and back to civilization.

The company and the trading post could go to Hell! He was tired of waiting for a relief man who did not arrive.

Bells tinkled, up the trail, and muleteers chanted. A white man's big voice cursed man and beast alike. That would be McTavish. Layne started, remembering something. He dashed across the compound and into the dirt-floored office, where his dunnage was piled.

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Layne bundled the bedding rolls into the store room, among the bales of dik-dik hides, bags of wild coffee, bars of beeswax. He was ashamed to ask a servant to conceal evidence from McTavish's bitter eyes, so he did this job himself, all the while telling himself that when a man inherits six hundred pounds in cash, no company has a right to keep him waiting for a successor, week after week.

The tinkle of bells and *click-clock* of hoofs was near now, so Layne hurried to the gate. His Somali porters, hearing the approaching riders, had come from their brush-thatched huts and were waiting.

Then McTavish rounded the curve. He rode a cream-colored donkey whose red bridle was decorated with little bells. McTavish's Galla wife, a sleek girl with tightly braided and buttered pigtails which gleamed in the late afternoon light, came gracefully down the trail.

But the most impressive thing about McTavish was his red beard; it fanned out, magnificent and wild against the grimy *chamma* that cloaked him. For the rest, he wore rawhide sandals, and white canvas trousers that were skin-tight from calf to ankle.

"Hullo there," Layne said, frigidly.

McTavish was not disturbed by the cool greeting. He impartially sized up the rough building and the surrounding palisade of sharpened stakes. "It's thirsty riding, and a long way to Lake Zwai."

Servants and a gun bearer crowded about the donkey, needlessly helping the big Scot to dismount. An uncouth man, and a blot on the white race; but today Layne stuttered a little when he said, "Have a drink before you go on."

"Go on?" McTavish flung back his head and laughed. "With your compound to camp in?"

Resigned, Layne gestured toward the gate, and the residence-storehouse inside. Mrs. McTavish remained in the compound, with the animals and servants. Her red calico dress was new, and she was overloaded with trade jewelry.

THE old trader planted himself in the homemade chair in the office, and put his feet on Layne's desk—a neat bit of furniture, pieced together from packing cases. Though Layne had never used the varnish he had finally received from the coast. Zeal had flagged.

Jerjis, the Ethiopian handy man, came in with whisky. Outside, a goat bleated until a knife silenced it, and the smoke of a wood fire swirled into the dirt-floored office. Layne's men and the Scot's were chattering as they waited for supper to cook.

McTavish filled a tumbler to the brim and drained it at one gulp. He snorted, wiped drops from his beard, and gratefully inhaled the scent that clung to the back of his hairy paw. "A rare life, working for a company. Sometimes I envy you."

Layne straightened up, and thrust his chin out a little. "The grief is mine and the profit is theirs. Really splendid, what?"

McTavish refilled his glass. "And so you're leaving, eh? You might ask the new man in to drink with me."

"What do you mean?" Layne's ears were red.

McTavish gestured and cocked an ear to the native chatter. "I know from what they're saying, if I'd not already heard you're a rich man. Six hundred and three pounds, fourteen and tuppence, after death duties."

He grinned maliciously. Native telegraph operators gossip, and Ethiopia keeps no secrets. Layne might have expected that, but he gaped a moment, made a false start at speech.

"All right, I'm leaving!"

"Walking out, you mean."

Layne went into his dance: "These stupid niggers! Losing one pack train after another—claiming mules fell into ravines—claiming leopards got them—every time a new story—and I'm accountable. Too many rocks in each bag of coffee—doctored hides slipped in for first-grade ones—I'm bloody well through putting up with it any longer, after the way they've

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ignored me every time I wrote for a relief man."

He stopped, red and panting. It was a good story. He would sound like a minor prophet by the time he got to recite it in Djibouti, five hundred miles away. He added, "No one has a penny's worth of responsibility, not one of them."

"You forgot to mention the six hundred-odd pounds, laddie," McTavish said, gently. "The country always gets a new man. I didn't find it amusing at first, either."

"You're a free trader. If you'd not liked it, you could quit."

"Companies are used to grousing. They'd never expect you to walk out. Even if you threatened to. Try writing again."

"Why don't you try minding your own business?"

McTavish shrugged, and set his feet to the floor. He rose, deliberately. "I'll not be delaying your march in the morning. A pleasant trip to you, and it's none of my business, asking if you've ever stuck to one job long enough to do it right."

He turned to the door, and shouted to the men about the fire, "Off your haunches, you sons of Satan!"

"*Aywah, ammi!*" they sang out, and the Galla girl loudest of all.

His men helped him mount. Mrs. Fatmah McTavish trotted alongside the cream-colored donkey, and held a bowl of stew for the master to eat on the march.

LAYNE'S mule caravan set out at dawn. Below him, swirling mists hid the ravines through which the trail wound; here and there, the gray veil parted, and slanting sunlight picked out the pale green of millet patches that dotted the mountainside, and the waxen luster of coffee leaves.

He shivered in the biting chill, and wondered why those fool muleteers insisted on chanting. And then, from trying to help his sure-footed mount keep its balance on the steep descent, Layne forgot the cold.

And he was busy telling himself that he was justified in walking out. Somehow, that question would not stay settled, despite the wrath whipped up and nursed along because of the extended shortage of canned goods, and the arrival of a radio set whose insides had not survived a drop into a steep ravine.

He was sick of mutton and isolation and quinine, and that should close the issue; but as he rode, he worked back through his memory to add to the carefully listed examples of native unreliability.

Looking back, he could for a moment see Jerjis, tall and straight, his white *chamma* reaching from shoulder to ankle, standing in the gate of the abandoned factory. With all the bars of salt in the storeroom, he could buy enough beer and *tej* to stay drunk until the new factor arrived.

The presence of brush huts, hidden in the cedars, was revealed mainly by the bleating of goats, and the *thump-thump-thump* as Galla women pounded millet. There was the sourness of fermenting maize, and the woolly scent of garments soaked by the morning mists.

But much of the stench that displeased Layne came from the shovel-footed muleteers who trotted along, whacking their animals across the rump. They could not go any faster, but thumping them was good for discipline.

From a cross trail came a caravan loaded with goatskins filled with honey. Layne cursed, and said to his pack train chief, "Mikhail, shake it up! Or we'll have to wait here."

The old Ethiopian shook his head. "No, *gaeta*. He is a friend, and he wants to give us a present."

The animals already sensed that a halt was in order, and twisted athwart the path. Overhead, long-haired monkeys chattered and jabbered; derisively, Layne thought. Like the vultures soaring overhead, these diabolical creatures were waiting for an animal to slip and fall down to the sharp rocks below; it was fun to break into packs, and scatter and befoul the contents.

There was an exchange of presents. The

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leader of the other caravan spent half an hour, forcing a rank-smelling skin of beer on Layne, and examining the rifle that Layne's bearer proudly carried. The strangers were armed with long-headed spears, broad-bladed knives; some had archaic muzzle-loaders.

What with fraternizing and guzzling brew, and inspecting every bale in Layne's pack train, an hour more was lost. Now the sun was high, and Layne was sweating. Below, the plateau swam in a ruddy haze; dry and baked and seamed with a network of ravines which, whether crossed or detoured, meant hours of delay.

Finally, the cedar-grown slopes were behind Layne, and bananas ripened in simmering valleys. There were no longer any millet patches. Instead, red brown heads of *durra*, the size of a man's two fists, nodded in the blistering sun, and the dry yellow leaves crackled in the hot wind. You either froze or baked in this blasted Ethiopia.

The beer the muleteers had drunk in the chill of high elevation went to their heads. They stumbled and shouted. A mule that should have been helped down a grassy ledge lost its balance. Squealing, it went over the edge, looped time and again. The vultures, perched above a nearby village, languidly took wing.

Layne cursed and took a shot at one of the scavengers. His blanket roll was lost, and it would be a day's work retrieving it. In the meanwhile, tearing beaks would hopelessly befoul it.

Or so Mikhail said, after he had spent some minutes clubbing three muleteers into submission; in another moment, they would have cut each other to pieces with their heavy-bladed *jambias*.

Sobered by blows that would have cracked thinner skulls, they put their knives away and presently they were drinking from the same goatskin. Layne had lost half a day's march, mainly due to a gift exchange that involved too much of that damnable mess of fermented honey and meal. And now the advance was blocked by the ravines that scored the plateau and reached down to the volcanic barrier which guarded the coast.

Layne brushed stinging dust and sweat from his eyes and squinted through the dancing heat haze. Red rock, red soil, red dust; a wrathful ruddiness that made him hate everything as far as he could see, and himself into the bargain.

There was no spring in sight. The morning's sociability had cost too many miles. Layne drank the odorous stuff in the leather bag. It had been fresh, clean, sweet; but untanned goatskin never helped any water. It tasted the way the animals and porters smelled.

A MAN with a cleft stick in his hand came trotting through the dust. Thorns had slashed his shins, which were already seamed with the white scars left by rock and briar; his rawhide sandals were in ribbons, and dried sweat and dust left a reddish-gray cake on his buttered skin. His loin cloth was in rags, and the only substantial part of his scanty dress was the belt to which his heavy knife and pouch were hung.

It was Yasu, one of McTavish's men. When he grinned, the dust on his face cracked a little. Someone gave him a drink. Thin-lipped, sharp-faced, Yasu reminded Layne more of an over-colored Arab than of an African. *"Gaeta,"* he said, after a sparing gulp of water, "the master sends me to Diré Dawa with a letter, and begs that you let me go with your caravan."

The letter was stuck in the cleft stick that Yasu carried as a wand. He held it as a prized possession. Layne was thinking, "Why doesn't the silly ass stuff it into his pouch?" He said, "All right. Is your master sick?"

Yasu shook his head. "No, he's back at his station."

So the renegade Scot had not continued on the long road to Lake Zwai. Natural born liar, or else he'd learned the art from the niggers.

The yapping of jackals did not make Layne's dry camp any more pleasant. Their mockery disturbed him, and so did

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the October chill that bit through the bottom of his cot. Stirring, wrathful and uncomfortable, he cursed the unseen lurkers.

Dawn was the opening of a furnace door. The animals were restless, and the men silent. The pack train had scarcely started when the hot haze choked Layne. There was only rock and thorn along the ravine whose edge the caravan followed; but on the further side, he thought he could distinguish distant patches of green.

Detouring to the head of the rocky cleft, and then back again on the other side, would take the better part of the day.

The train moved slowly. After an hour, Layne was convinced that he was in a stationary cloud of stifling heat and dust. When there was any breeze, it reached into the shadow of his hat and scorched him as effectively as direct sun. A red film caked his lips, and when he would have welcomed a drink of stinking water, Mikhail said, "No, *gaeta*. There will be none left when the heat is strong."

Far off, the haze thinned for a moment, and that illusive patch of green mocked him with its suggestion of coolness. It was not mirage, not the reaction of optic nerves seared to protest by the unending red; but it might as well have been, with two parallel ravines blocking the direct approach to the water hole.

Yasu trotted alongside of Layne's mule. His sandals had reached the vanishing point, but his gait did not falter, except when he paused to pull a thorn from his foot.

"Must have hoofs like a horse," Layne told himself, as Yasu caught up again. Stains and dust covered the envelope that the messenger carried, and thus Layne could not read the inscription that bobbed along at his side.

BUT in the dizziness which heat and the gait of his mount finally produced, he began to speculate on Yasu's business in Diré Dawa. The message must be important; perhaps a draft to be forwarded to Europe, perhaps an order for some medicine that McTavish needed.

By holding Layne's stirrup-leather, the courier could travel faster than he could alone. This, as far as Layne could see, was the only reason why the fellow accompanied the caravan.

Speculation, however, was not wetting Layne's thick tongue. The head of the ravine was apparently no nearer than it had been at the dimly remembered start. He gestured to Mikhail, after a long squint at the steep wall, and croaked, "Look here, you! There's a trail to the bottom. It comes up on the other side."

"Yes, *gaeta.*"

"That's the second one you've passed up." Layne was indignant.

"It is not well to risk it."

"Head them down there!"

Mikhail diffidently objected, "But it may rain. It is time."

"You damn fool, won't it rain up here, too?"

Mikhail shrugged. An order was an order. The caravan filed down the steep path. Once below the rim, Layne realized that thus far he had gotten only an introduction to the study of being roasted. The barren rock reflected the heat; each ragged tongue and shelf was blistering, and now there was not even that stifling breeze.

Yasu was no longer gripping Layne's stirrup-leather. At first he assumed that the courier had fallen back because the trail was too narrow. Then, glancing back while he halted for a moment in a sweltering shadow, he saw Yasu, marching along the lip of the ravine, alone.

Pressure from the rear made Layne's mule move on, and he was too near suffocation to waste breath on Yasu. "The silly ass," he told himself, "didn't get orders to take short cuts, so he's going the long way."

But he did have to admit that Yasu was taking good care of that important letter. Except that he was exposing himself to attack by a prowling leopard, camping alone that night.

The boulders that dotted the gravel bed were round and polished; they were a mocking reminder of long-forgotten

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moisture; and in the crevices of the wall were bits of driftwood, sun-bleached. The sides of the ravine were stained and marked by flood waters.

"Whole worthless country drying up," Layne concluded, thinking of other areas where climatic changes had produced deserts.

The autographs of a stream that must have been ten feet deep in no way made his thickened lips and wooden tongue any more comfortable.

The path that ascended the further wall was too hazardous to try. Boulders blocked it; obstacles which seen close at hand proved to be insurmountable. Mikhail must have realized this from the start, for with scarcely an upward glance he led the caravan along the bottom.

The men were too thirsty to mutter or complain, but they exchanged sullen glances as they and the mules stumbled along, winding in and out among boulders the size of pianos. Sometimes the trunks of dead trees lay across the path. Once the packs had to be lifted, so that the mules could pass beneath a trunk that had been flung athwart the narrow cleft.

Layne began to see the wisdom of Mikhail's original plan. By the time the caravan came to a path that reached the surface, it might as well have remained on the flat ground where the going was easier. This short cut was not working out properly.

Layne's wrath choked him. That blockhead of a Mikhail must have known, all the time, what a furnace this ravine was; how hard it would be to get out and to the other side.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Mikhail answered, "*Gaeta,* we are here to obey. And we will save an hour, if God is merciful."

There was more than reproach in that calm answer. Mikhail was afraid; so were the men, and the stumbling mules uneasily sniffed the air.

THEN Layne noted the sudden coolness, and the purple-blackness that cut off the savage red glare from the lips of the ravine. He was grateful for the coolness, until Mikhail shouted, "Hurry, children of Satan!"

The command was needless. The muleteers were already beating their beasts. Without knowing why, Layne was afraid. The coolness made him uneasy, and the large drops that every now and then flattened against his dry lips gave him no comfort, though he licked up the moisture with his tongue.

A sullen rumbling, far off, made the caravan lose all semblance of order. Thunder, stretched into a prolonged roll by the echoes in the winding cleft, shook the quickly darkening chasm. A blue-white blaze ahead dazzled Layne. Then the first October rain poured down.

His shirt was drenched, his boots were filled. He took off his hat, watched the dust rise from the brim, which he bent

(*Please turn the page*)

ROMEOS

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up, saucer-shaped. Then it filled with water, in a few seconds. Eagerly, he gulped it as he rode. The men yelled, the mules squealed and snorted.

They had not covered a hundred yards when they were splashing up to their fetlocks, but none stopped to drink. It was like the flight of a beaten army. An animal fell, drenching Layne; it sank into the deep pool that had been a simmering hollow a few minutes earlier. Water-logged packs kept it from rising.

Layne shouted, "Mikhail! Get that animal on its feet!"

"No time!" the leader cried. "We'll all drown!"

Water was already half way to a mule's knee, and the rain was pelting. Hundreds of square miles of plateau, unable to absorb the sudden downfall, were draining into the ravine. Brush and deadwood floated down with the flood. Animals floundered, and no one could help them. Mikhail yelled, gestured.

Safety was not far ahead, but water eddying fiercely around boulders made progress slower every pace. Layne's mount fell, and pitched him headlong against a rock. Two caravan men paused long enough to jerk him to his feet. They dragged him a dozen yards. Then, when he could stumble along under his own power, it was every man for himself.

A mule, caught in the full wash of the current, floated downstream. Driftwood and a heavy pack gave it not a chance. Frantic animals tried to scale the wall; they fell, and they were engulfed.

A treacherous current caught Layne, just as he sighted the ascending path. It was dark now. The rain was blinding; the roar of thunder and rushing water blotted every man's voice.

No one heard Layne's yell. The flood hurled him against the wall. He swam with the current, and finally caught a tongue of rock. Battered and half drowned, he clung to it.

At first, his arms had no strength to do more than that. But he had to get up on that rock.

Somehow, he climbed up a few feet. Then, wedged in a crevice beyond which there was no ascent, he watched the flood rising, moment by moment.

As the water rose to his feet, he had plenty of time to realize why detours were in order. He had nothing to do but hang on and wait for the flood to subside, and to curse that unreliable Mikhail.

By morning, the water was low enough for Layne to pick his way upstream. Long before the night was over, he had resigned himself to being stranded. The survivors, fairly assuming him to have been drowned, would return to their mountain homes. Instead of resenting their desertion, he began to remember that they had helped him as long as they could, even though he had ordered them into the trap.

It was not until he reached the trail that he realized how far he had been washed from his men. No wonder they had given him up for lost. When he finally clambered to the surface, he could find no trace of them. Rain had washed out every mark. However, they must have gone toward the head of the ravine to retrace their course from the mountains.

The thing to do was to overtake them; but having missed two meals weakened him, and he was cramped from spending the night in a rocky crevice. Layne was a poor candidate for a crosscountry pursuit.

Vultures circled overhead. He shook his fist at them. He had to do something to fight down panic. They seemed to know that he did not have a chance. Then he realized that in this case at least, they were not necessarily prophets, for the ravine must be scattered with the bodies of trapped animals.

His cigar lighter was none the worse, and he had a sheath knife. Somewhere, wedged among the rocks, there must be a freshly drowned mule.

AN HOUR later, Layne was eating; and he was hungry enough to relish what he had won from the scavengers.

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He did not even have to remind himself that, after all, it was only technically carrion.

There was enough roast mule to feed him until he reached Harar, where he could join a coffee caravan. Although he did not stop to figure it out, this was one enterprise that he had to finish. So he set out, wondering if his boots would last. . . .

Layne was not quite sure of his direction. The green haze, which he had seen from the further lip of the ravine, was not visible from where he now stood, for the cleft in the plateau had wound considerably. At the point where he emerged, barren hummocks hemmed him in. He made his best guess, and carried on.

The highest of the knolls should give him his orientation, he reasoned; but all he won was a climb that drenched him with sweat. Without a guide, that seemingly level plateau became treacherous.

Layne's face lengthened. He missed the chatter of the muleteers. The silence was oppressive, and he was not at all sure that he had outwitted the vultures.

Then he saw the the man who hobbled along the rimrock. A long knife gleamed in the sun, and the fellow's buttered hide reflected the light. White men were far from popular in Ethiopia, and one without an escort would be lucky to escape with his life.

Layne was in no condition to fight or run. Instead of remaining crouched where he was, he edged to the shelter of a thorn bush.

That motion betrayed him. He had scarcely won cover when the posture of the approaching man told Layne that he had been detected. The only thing to do was to brazen it out. After all, the man was limping, which might offset the advantage of a long and heavy knife. Layne's own was a toy beside it.

Layne crouched there, his heart's racing beat making a thousand drums thump in his brain. Sweat formed in great drops on his skin and slid down his body. Then he gasped.

The fellow stopped, shaded his eyes for a moment. Then he shouted and came nearer. He ran crabwise, one leg dragging. Layne went to meet him.

It was Yasu, criss-crossed with scratches. A scrap of dirty cloth bound his thigh. He explained, "A leopard met me, but I killed him. Later, I met your men. They said you had been drowned, and they wanted me to go back with them."

Layne did not like the looks of Yasu's wounds. He wondered how the courier could move at all, much less limp. "You came back to look for me?"

"Not when your own men said there was no chance." He fumbled in his pouch. "But this letter. Is it spoiled?"

He was anxious about the blood stains.

"Looks all right," Layne said, wondering if anyone could read the address after what rain and dirt and footprints had done to the ink.

Yasu put the letter away, and accepted a chunk of mule meat. "So you can make a fire?"

"Yes." He flicked the cigar lighter and showed him.

"Will you make me a small fire?"

"What for?"

"To cook some medicine. Leopard claws are poisonous."

From his pouch he took a pannikin and a chunk of fat from the beast he had killed. This he melted and when it was boiling, he brushed it on his wounds. "There is nothing better. We have always done thus and it never fails."

Yasu was presently ready to march. Layne said, "It's easier to go back. You can't carry on with that leg."

Yasu could not quite understand how any white man, one of a race that thought so [illegible] ropose returning with an undelivered message. "I will go as far as God and my leg allow," he answered, and turned to lead the way to Harar.

He did not look back.

Layne tried to argue about it. He named an imposing sum in Maria Theresa dollars, bars of salt, and red calico. "I'll give

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you that at the trading post. Then you can get a mule and ride to Diré Dawa."

"It would not be fitting," Yasu declared, and hobbled on.

Nor would he give any hint as to the emergency that made McTavish send a special courier. There was no stamp on the envelope; apparently it was to be delivered by hand. Layne, very much perplexed, followed his hobbling guide.

Later, when they reached a grove, Yasu cut himself a staff. He also looted a wild bees' nest, and there was honey to add to the stock of half baked mule.

BEFORE the sun set, Layne was convinced that Yasu was a madman. There was never a whimper, but the bronzed face began to look gray greenish, and dirty; the eyes were bloodshot, and the man's mouth was twisted. He stumped along, staring fixedly ahead.

Finally, dizzy from the heat, Layne could no longer stand the persistence of that walking dummy.

"Grab hold of my shoulder," he muttered.

Fever, and not the sun, made Yasu's skin hot. Sometimes he shivered as if freezing. Layne by now knew better than to argue with the fool. He couldn't say, "You need a couple days in bed."

There were only thorns and shadeless trees on the road to Harar.

Yasu began muttering. Later, he giggled and sang. The bandage had slipped; and Layne had trouble in swallowing his stomach as he replaced the cloth. The largest wound looked worse, and flies buzzed maddeningly.

It was like supporting a corpse that still knew how to talk. Still and all, Yasu's instinct for direction was heading him toward Harar. Layne knew that he himself would have been lost. He was ready to drop; he could no longer support the Ethiopian's weight. Yasu stumbled along, one arm kinked as if still leaning on a man's shoulder.

"Damn fool," Layne mumbled, and began to laugh. "Carrying a letter. Ha! Rain and wind can't stop 'em on their appointed rounds."

He stretched his stride and caught up with the Ethiopian. His boots were slashed; Yasu's sandals were gone, but those splay feet reached out, pad, pad, padding along the baking plateau.

They reached Harar that night. Layne did not know whether he had carried Yasu, or whether it was the other way about. The truth of it was, they had taken turns about, supporting each other. It was Yasu who found a caravanserai; they stumbled in a heap, and were sound asleep among the goats huddled in a corner, before the keeper of the mud-walled court was aroused.

When he awoke, Layne saw that Yasu was somewhat the better for rest, but in no shape to carry on. "Listen here. I can peg along. Give me your letter!"

The Ethiopian looked up from a bowl of goat's milk, and wiped his lips. "No, this is my work. They will give me a mule, and there is a coffee caravan going to Diré Dawa."

Layne blinked and shook his head. Though the plantations about Harar made the trip cooler, he did not like the march. But for the small gap that now separated him from Diré Dawa and the railroad, he would have turned back.

Yet there was something fascinating about the ultimate arrival at the railway. Curiosity buoyed him up; he ceased questioning Yasu, being certain that he would soon get a clue to the mission that had made the courier carry on.

That evening they saw Diré Dawa baking in the sun, and the rails that reached from Addis Ababa to the coast. Mud-walled houses, cubical masonry fortresses, brush huts, tin-roofed buildings swam in the glare. The caravan crossed the low ridge behind town, and Layne caught the scent of coffee, crude incense, and burning dung.

As the caravan filed down the dusty main street, Layne rode beside Yasu. The Ethiopian was swaying in the saddle, and clutching the high pommel in both hands.

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"Who's getting the letter?" Layne demanded. "I'll help you."

"The master said someone could read it for me."

HE HANDED Layne the envelope. There had been a name, but no street address. There was only one way to settle the question, so he lifted the flap, though only after a wary look at Yasu. The Ethiopian made no objection.

The single sheeet of paper was addressed to Layne. McTavish had written, "Tell Yasu to go to Petro Nikopoulos' shop and get me a pack of safety razor blades. You might also tell him, for me, what you think of unreliable natives."

It took Layne a full minute to catch the point. Then he was certain that McTavish had purposely smudged the envelope so that Layne would finally have to open the letter, in Diré Dawa.

For a moment he was too angry to speak. "The red-bearded blighter! Hasn't shaved for forty years—the blasted impudence—"

He looked at Yasu, at the man's wounds, at his haggard face; then he knew that his wrath was on the Ethiopian's account. But as he groped for words, he realized that McTavish could not have foreseen the encounter with a leopard, or the disaster to the caravan. He had intended only to show a quitter how a native would march on foot across that baking plateau and deliver a letter.

"What does he say, *gaeta?*"

Layne told him. He narrowly watched Yasu's face; but there was no change of expression. The fellow nodded. "It is well, but will you point out the store?"

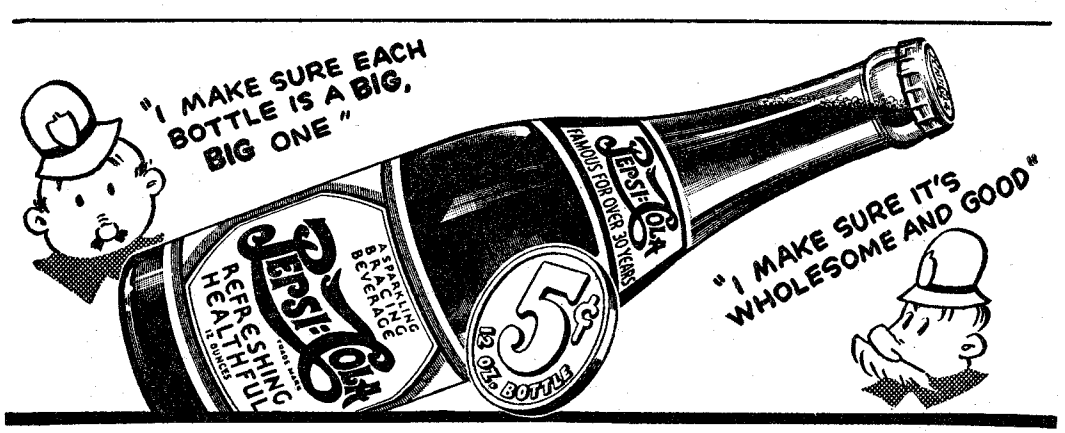
Layne helped him find the Greek's tin-roofed shanty. Yasu put the packet of razor blades into his pouch. There was a hotel near the railroad station; there Layne could rest and clean up, after buying himself fresh clothing. He knew all this, but he stood there, sensing that Yasu was waiting for a word of dismissal.

But Layne did not speak.

"What message do I take back?" Yasu finally asked.

Layne took one long look at the railway station, where the twice-a-week train would stop in the morning to pick up passengers to Djibouti, civilization, and the six hundred pounds, back home. The company could jolly well go to Hell; they had it coming. After what he had endured on the march, facing his employers would be easy.

So easy, that Layne decided he'd not quit at all. He said to Yasu, "There is a message, but I'm taking it back myself. As soon as you can sit on a mule without hanging on."



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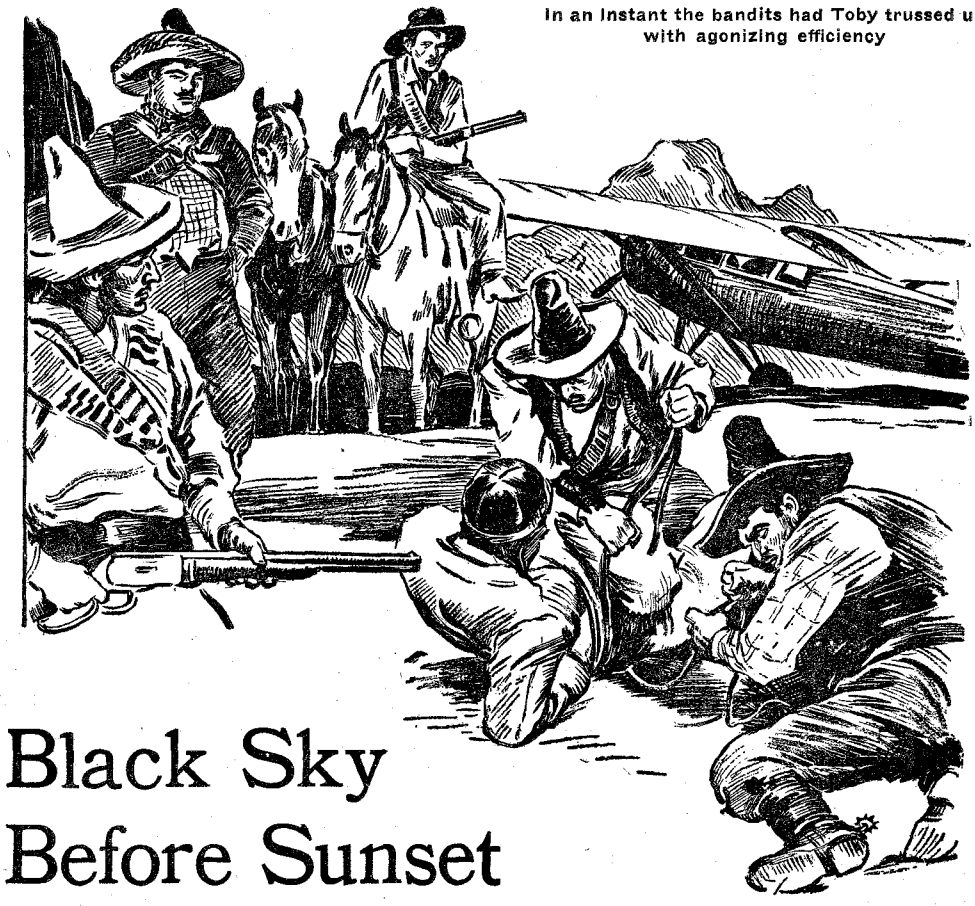

In an instant the bandits had Toby trussed up with agonizing efficiency

Black Sky Before Sunset

Fly low, Toby Wayne. Down in the valley there's a committee of welcome waiting —composed of a politely savage Mexican bandit, a thorny Scottish engineer, and a ton of slay-as-you-go dynamite

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "Medals for Madmen," "He Flies Through the Air," etc.

TOBIAH WAYNE was quartering northwesterly over a deep, rock-walled canyon of the Sierra Madres when his engine quit. On the vaguely drawn Mexican map the canyon looked like a frayed raveling, gathering from many small gorges into a tiny, wrinkled thread and abruptly ending nowhere.

But Toby was used to Mexican maps and their vagarities. He'd been fighting them, and other things, for the last two years. The other things had him whipped; completely whipped.

It was fuel trouble. The big radial of his Norford highwing didn't stop dead, as it would have with ignition trouble.

He shifted tanks, checked fuel pressure, worked the altitude adjustment; but his chief interest was the country below. There was only one place to land. That was on

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a narrow bench, slightly raised from the floor of a side canyon. If he got in there, he thought, it would be more a matter of good luck than good flying.

The engine sputtered feebly for a dozen turns of the prop and stopped. Toby cut his switches. He wanted that engine as cold as possible. A forced landing and a crackup with a hot engine is bad form—very bad form if you have gasoline in the tanks.

Stalling, his wheels barely clearing a mesquite clump, he dragged the stick clear back, toed down on the brakes. He landed with them half set, and rode them as hard as he dared. At that he had to ground-loop at the far end to keep from running off the bench.

He found the trouble in short time—as soon as he had walked through the forward, four-seat passenger cabin, the big freight compartment aft of it and around outside to the nose. A stream of gasoline, the size of two fingers, gushed through cowling louvers.

He leaped back inside and closed the selector valve. He couldn't have moved faster if that gasoline were his own life blood. As a matter of fact, that's just about what it represented. Service stations on the backbone of the Mexican Sierras are few and far between. A man can starve to death twice trying to find one.

Having stopped the gasoline flow, Toby walked a safe distance from his ship and lighted a cigarette. Looking at his homely, sun-and-wind blackened face, you wouldn't know that he'd just stopped ten feet short of rolling over a thirty-foot outcropping bluff. This wasn't because Toby was an insensitive animal, or a man of iron nerves. It was merely that he had been slapped down so many times in the last two years that he was getting used to it.

He stood up and flipped his cigarette in the general direction of a lizard that had been studying him with beady, unblinking eyes. Tobiah Wayne was a big man; so very big that in the Flying Cadet corps they had called him "Tiny!"

"No use cryin' over spilt milk," he observed tritely and went into the freight compartment to get his tool roll.

HE GOT the safety pins out of the cowling and took that off. He examined the broken feed line and something very near to emotion came into his brown eyes. He looked at the bottom cowling. "Rifle bullet," he commented. "Right through the settling bowl."

He swore softly and climbed up on the wing to sound his tanks. The left wing tank was intact, fifty-seven gallons; the main center-section tank had fifty minutes of gas in it; the right, as he already knew, was empty. He got busy removing the feed lines for repair.

Toby had them laid out on the ground and was gathering dry mesquite wood to heat his soldering iron when he heard the rattle of shale rock.

"Buenos días, señor."

There were five horsemen, and more coming. The leader wore a huge black sombrero, embroidered with tarnished silver, banded by disks of the metal, the size of peso pieces. On a smaller man it would have looked ridiculous.

"Hello," Toby answered. "I didn't know anybody lived around here."

"Como se dice? I no spick the English, *señor."*

That was no hindrance. Toby had come down into Mexico two years before, with everything he had, to make good on a small airmail contract. He had studied the language until he could speak it as well as a native.

Toby repeated his words in Mexican.

The leader shrugged. "Nobody lives around here, *señor."*

The way the words were spoken brought a quick glance from the American. This man spoke pleasantly but that was the only pleasant thing about him. The horsemen were collecting in a circle about the plane. They sat easily alert, side-slouched in their saddles. Each saddle had a booted carbine; each man carried at least one side-arm.

The black-hatted leader was making a

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cigarette out of dry corn husk. He squinted upward at the afternoon sun. "I think Pedro makes one damn' good shot, eh?"

Toby wasn't exactly surprised. "One of your men shot me down?"

Black-hat chuckled. *"Si, señor.* Pedro say he think he will shoot you. We laugh at him. We have all tried such shots. Pedro aims his rifle, like this, with one hand. His horse stumbles, the rifle goes *bang—"*

"And that gives him just enough lead to hit me," Toby finished, disgusted at this quirk of fate. "Well, now that you have me down, what do you want?"

"Ah, yes." The leader blew smoke from mouth and nostrils, studying Tobiah Wayne. "Everybody wants something. Not so, *señor?* I think first I will take that gun you have."

Toby would have given him his forty-five automatic without argument. You can't argue successfully with a score of armed men. But as the bandit swung from his horse his big rowelled spur jabbed into the Norford's rudder.

The ripping of tight fabric did something to Tobiah Wayne. The essence of two years of smoldering anger boiled into his brain. He leaped and struck at the same instant. His hard-balled right fist caught the bandit between the eyes. The man dropped; the brim of his sombrero came forward, covering his swarthy face.

Toby drew his Colt and started to back up against the Norford's fuselage. That would be no protection against a bullet. His movement was pure instinct. Toby knew that he was going to die shortly.

A RIFLE butt caught him in the small of the back. He pitched forward onto his face, his automatic exploding twice as he fell. One of the men tried to force his horse to trample him. The horse rebelled, rearing and plunging. Another rifle butt came plummeting down. Toby twisted with the blow so that the metal-shod wood grazed the back of his head.

"Stop that! You, Manuel, I order you to stop. All of you." The leader spoke.

Toby played dead. It wasn't a hard thing to do. He was still groggy from the glancing blow and his back felt as though hot lead were running through his spine.

"You think you will give him an easy death?" Black-hat inquired. His boot thudded against Toby's ribs. "I don't think so. I think he will stay right here. He will get very hungry, yes. But the thirst will be much, much worse. Pretty soon the *zopilotes* will be flying nearer and nearer, watching him die. Perhaps they will begin to eat his eyes out before he is completely dead. I have seen that happen."

Toby heard them moving about the plane, heard the gurgling of water as they divided the contents of his two-gallon canteen. They took his money belt; he heard the clinking of the twenty-peso gold pieces; the satisfied chuckle of the leader as he counted them.

Toby bulged his muscles as much as he could while they bound him with rawhide thongs and threw him on the ground, face upward, and removed his hat so the afternoon slant of the sun struck him. There was little of the mid-day heat in it now, but tomorrow . . . tomorrow he would suffer the tortures of a man-made Hell. Finally the bandit leader emptied his pistol haphazardly into the Norford.

They were gone.

Toby relaxed, not trying to struggle out of the rawhide bindings. They weren't so tight, now that his muscles were relaxed.

This, Toby thought, was probably the end of his Mexican adventure. Two years before he had signed a contract with the federal government of Mexico to carry airmail and what passengers and freight he could pick up, over a four-hour inland route in southern Mexico. Since then he had spent almost all of a comfortable inheritance, greasing the palms of Mexican politicos.

He had made just one try for justice from a Mexican court. It had cost him a thousand dollars gold to learn that a Mexican mechanic, once hired, must be given three months pay upon dismissal, even

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though he comes to work drunk and carelessly burns up a two-thousand-dollar hangar.

Toby waited until long after dark, waited until he could feel a slight moisture of dew on his face. Dry rawhide stretches when it wets wet.

It was long past sun-up before he had his hands and arms free. The rest should have been easy, but he was almost exhausted from his night of struggling with the tough rawhide. It took him an hour to get the other knots undone and free his ankles.

Only one of the leader's bullets had done any harm to his ship. But that was plenty. A hole was drilled through the left wing tank. There was not more than an inch of gas left in it.

Toby soldered the gasoline lead pipes, splitting a larger gauge of copper tubing to sleeve the joint and by-passing the shattered glass settling bowl. He worked in an absent-minded, methodical manner. He had not much more than a half hour of flying time left in the center-section tank. A half hour would leave him still up in the high Sierras. He wouldn't be any better off there than where he was.

The sun broiled moisture from his body. He had found a few drops of water left in his canteen and had licked greedily at these. Occasionally he squinted up into the glaring sky. The *zopilotes* were up there, as the Mexican had predicted. They were circling lower, watching his stumbling movements about the plane.

Once he stopped and looked at the tangled thongs that had bound him. He saw himself as he might have been, lying face upward, his eyelids scorching, shriveling, under the blistering beat of sun. The eyes were wide, then, naked to the sun. Buzzards made tentative, hopping advances, hooked beaks eager for those tempting titbits.

The black-hatted one had seen such things happen, had planned such a death for the American. Anger heated the flyer's brain at the thought, such anger that he was dizzy with it for the moment.

He put a sloppy patch on the fabric of his rudder. His eyes ached from the glare of sun. When he closed them they felt rough, as though some one had been playing marbles with them on a sandy beach.

A shadow crossed the plane. The buzzards were coming lower, gliding, soaring with the up-thrusts of heated air currents; watching him.

"Everybody wants something," Toby muttered. "They want me. Everybody wants something."

He stopped, tilting his head in a startled manner. The words seemed to repeat themselves. "I want something," he shouted at the blue, pitiless sky. He tried to keep his dry, sun-peeled lips from twitching. "I want to see that Mex hung and quartered. I want to see every Mex in the world hung and quartered!'

He was moving now like an automaton. He got into the plane and shoved the inertia starter button.

TOBY didn't try to climb up out of the main canyon. Climbing would slow him and drink too deeply of his precious gasoline. Occasionally he looked straight downward at the dry canyon bed. Once he thought he saw horsemen. But his eyes were beginning to do funny things now.

It was as though he were peering through thick glass, looking at a marine world. It was like the aquarium in Golden Gate Park. But in San Francisco they had fog, often; blessed moisture. Here there was nothing. Nothing but dry, seared mountain slopes.

He drained what little gas there was in the left tank into the main tank. He sat, cuddling the joy stick, waiting. They had taken his wristwatch and the panel clock hadn't run since the ship passed its acceptance tests.

There was no use looking at his map. That ravelling of a line that marked the canyon, was graven on his memory. The line ended abruptly. What was beyond it? Tobiah Wayne found that he wasn't greatly concerned about what was beyond. If

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it was an open valley, he might get out of this. If not, those circling buzzards would have their fill of him.

Toby squinted ahead. He shut his eyes for a moment, rolling them about, as though to moisten them inside the burning sockets. He looked again. The canyon seemed to disappear. Ahead of him was a haze of distance. Beyond this the jagged outline of a mountain wall. He thought he saw trees in the foreground, buildings and a tall smokestack giving out a misty blue. The engine seemed to clear its throat.

Toby sighed and humped forward to the stick. As the engine stuttered again, sucking up the last of the gasoline and windmilled without power he eased the nose down to maintain flying speed. As though in obedience to that stick movement the canyon floor came upward to meet him. He would never make it. That round, mountain-walled valley ahead—if there really was a valley, if he wasn't imagining it—meant one final crackup.

An upblast of air struck his wings. Then he was being sucked downward toward the rock-strewn canyon floor. He held the stick back barely at flying speed, fighting for lateral balance. Suddenly he was aware of five hundred feet of clearance beneath his wheels. He was slanting down past that tall smokestack. The acrid fumes of burning wood struck his nostrils. Ahead was a flat stretch of mesa.

He eased the plane over a clump of stunted juniper and leveled off, too late. The ship struck wheels first and bounded. The thin, high-altitude air washed out from under his wings. He struck and bounced again, one wingtip slanting toward the ground. He jerked the stick back and to the left-hand corner, got the wing up. A horseman came toward him at a full, reckless run, the rider leaning forward over the saddlehorn.

Absentmindedly Toby cut his switches. As he walked slowly back through the cabin and freight compartment he heard a boyish voice calling to him in Spanish from the other side of the plane.

"That was so grand, *señor,* the way you jumped the airplane about. But why did you land here? My father does not like airplanes. I have always wanted to ride in an airplane. Where are you, *señor?*"

Toby moved slowly forward, outside the plane, reached for the slanting wing strut to steady himself. His head, where he had been struck by the rifle butt, throbbed with pain. "Everybody wants something," he said crazily, his voice high and thin. "You want an airplane ride. I wanta see every Mexican in the world hung and quartered."

The horseman had come around the tail of the Norford, and was leaning forward in the saddle to study Toby. Dark, curved brows lowered over eyes that were a deep azure. Red lips were straight in disapproval. Her skin was a tan, tinted with rose, like the early morning clouds just feeling the glow of sun behind them. A great wealth of corn-colored hair, in thick, smooth braids, was coiled low on a slender neck.

"But, *señor, I* am a Mexican. Why do you want me hung and quartered?"

Toby clung desperately to the wing strut, wondering if he had passed out while flying the canyon; wondering if this was some sort of after-death vision.

"You're not Mexican," he muttered. "Mexicans have black hair."

"But, *señor,* have you never heard of Spaniards who are not dark? My people are from Spain, but I am Mexican and am very proud to be . . . *Señor,* you are ill!"

"Hung an' quartered," Toby muttered and pitched forward onto his face. . . .

AFTER that Toby was aware of a growing bodily comfort, of lying in a wide bed between sheets and seeing faces that seemed to float in and out of his consciousness. The girl's face was there often. Once she jerked a cool glass from his hands. "No, no," she said in her husky, boy's voice, "you are a big pig. Too much water will make you sick."

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Things came into focus. He was talking to a man, a tall, rangy American whose gray, clipped mustache, over a wide mouth, gave a touch of the military. He carried himself in an erect, efficient manner. Evidently the man didn't like what Toby had been saying.

"So you let some Mexican politicos fleece you and got held up by a Mexican gang and that makes all Mexicans a bunch of dogs, eh? Well, the same thing happens to your breed in the States, or any other place."

Tobiah Wayne realized that he must have been telling his misfortunes; whining about them. He felt shamed. He had never spoken of them before.

"You don't like Mexicans, and we don't like you," the man continued, his voice crisp with suppressed anger. "I've had experience with two of you boozing airplane pilots. One of them skipped out with a plane and sold it in Guatemala. I pistol-whipped the other Romeo and chased him out. It's either liquor or women or both. Now what do *you* want?"

Toby was conscious of a steady, rhythmic beat. The sound, or rather, the feeling of it, had been ticking at the edge of his mind. What did he want? Everybody wants something.

"What's that?" he asked, moving his hand in cadence with the sound.

"What? Oh. Those're mill stamps. This is the Jennings Latino-Americano mine. I'm Bob Jennings, owner."

"You're not Mexican."

The man made a quick, impatient gesture. "I'm a United States American. I came down here to make a living when the States universities started quantity production on mining engineers. Do I have to go around blatting all the time that I'm an American? What would we think of a Mexican who came up and did that in the States?"

Toby couldn't answer him, or was too tired for the effort. The room was darkening from twilight outside but he could see it was a big room, the 'dobe walls whitewashed, the wide planks of the floor showing the velvet sheen of hand polishing. An advertising calendar hung on one wall. A man in mining clothes was crimping detonator caps on dynamite fuse.

"He's left handed," Toby commented. "Or a damn' poor powder monkey."

Jennings followed his gaze. "What d'you know about powder monkeys?"

"My father was a construction contractor," Toby explained, and went to sleep on the last word. He dreamed he was a little boy again. He was helping Pat Murry load a hole, watching him split the golden sticks of dynamite, scooping screen dirt into the hole while Pat worked the tamp rod and lectured him on the placing of shots. And then there were sounds of shots. Or it was his mother popping corn for him in a pan with a tin lid.

Toby woke up and knew from the sunshine outside his window that it must be mid-day or near that. He stared at the upper glass of the window. He got up to examine it and noticed that his wrists were bandaged, where the rawhide had cut into them in his struggles to free himself. There was a round hole in the glass, with spiderweb cracks radiating from it. A Mexican tapped at his door and came in, carrying a bottle of boiled coffee extract and some hot milk.

Toby drank the *café con leche* greedily. "I could eat a cow, hooves, horns and all," he announced. He couldn't keep his eyes off that bullet hole in the window glass.

THE Mexican looked at him, unsmiling. Evidently he understood English and, just as evidently, he had heard Toby' delirious raving about Mexicans. He motioned toward a small side room. There were towels, a wooden tank of water with a gourd dipper. The floor sloped to a center drain.

The Mexican said, in English: "Your clothes have been washed and ironed, *señor.*" He motioned toward a chair where Toby's khaki breeches lay neatly over his other clothes. His flying boots were on the floor, cleaned and polished; near them his

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traveling bag. "The *señorita* wishes you to know that breakfast will be ready when you have bathed and dressed."

"You speak good English," Toby commented.

"Thank you, *señor.*" The boy left.

Toby sloshed water over himself with the gourd dipper. His back was stiff and his ribs tender, where the Mexican had booted them, but his head no longer troubled him. He tried to whistle. His lips felt stiff. He didn't want to whistle, anyway. "I'm as popular here as a case of smallpox," he commented aloud.

The Mexican boy came back as Toby was finishing with shaving. He led the way down a wide hall, through an immense living room with rough stone fireplace and book-lined walls. Toby could see a dining room, through glassed folding doors, but the boy led him past this into a smaller breakfast room.

Toby had finished eating his papaya, three fried eggs with ham and quantities of toast, when the girl came in. She wore a jade-green house dress. Her hair gleamed dull gold, coronet braid circling a proudly tilted head. "Good morning, Mr. Wayne."

Toby got to his feet, feeling clumsy and uncouth with his size. "Is it still morning, *señorita?*" he asked, in Spanish.

"It is past ten o'clock," she replied. "Please, Mr. Wayne, we will speak English. Or American, if you prefer. I had my university education in the States." She sat down, motioning him to be seated, looking at him with cool aloofness.

"I seem to have told my name, and everything else," Toby said. "But I don't know your name."

"Roberta Jennings," the girl told him.

"Then you're . . . Bob Jennings is . . ."

"My father. My mother was Mexican —Spanish, if you like. But she was born in Mexico."

"Listen, Miss Jennings. What I said about Mexicans yesterday . . . I'd been through a lot of tough . . ."

"Yes. I know. You feel very sorry for yourself, Mr. Wayne."

Impulsive words came to Toby's lips. "Miss Jennings, you're beautiful; you're positively queenly that way. But I wish you'd be more human."

She stood up, her lips straight. "I was going to discuss your situation with you," she said. "It seems better, though, that you speak with my father. Please wait for him in the living room."

Toby watched her exit. "Just the same," he said aloud, "I'm going to be on your hands until I get that damned Mex who kicked me. And when I do get him I'll choke his neck till he's blacker than that sombrero he wears."

Toby found Bob Jennings waiting for him in the living room. His right arm was was in a silk scarf sling.

Before the flyer could speak, a Mexican came to the opened porch door, removing his sombrero with a small bow.

Jennings commanded sharply, "Come in here, Huerto."

The Mexican stood, bewilderment on American shifted his arm in the sling, wincing a little as though the movement hurt him.

"You just got here from the canyon gate?"

"Si, señor. I see the signal flag."

"But you didn't see the Caballero Negro. What were you and your men doing last night?"

"But *señor,* we were guarding the canyon. We were—"

"Huerto, you're lying. There's only one way to get into this valley and Caballero Negro got in. I'll take care of you later, Huerto. That's all."

The Mexican stood, bewilderment on his face.

"That's all," Jennings repeated sharply. He turned on Wayne as the Mexican left. "Last night," he said, "I asked you what you wanted. Now speak up."

"I want a job in your mine."

Jennings looked up, surprised. "A job? What do you know about mining?"

"I know quite a lot about powder work. If you don't need a powder monkey I'll handle a shovel along with the best mucker you've got."

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"What's your game, anyway?"

Toby shrugged. "I need gasoline and food. I'm broke."

"You've got a full stomach now. I'll give you what gasoline you need to clear out of here."

Toby shook his head, slowly. "You don't understand, Jennings." He motioned toward the southeast. "I'm going to get that man if it takes me the rest of my life."

Jennings' voice was dry. "That sort of heroic talk sounds good in the movies. About what I'd expect from you. But it'd take more than *you've* got to hunt a man down in those canyons."

The two men exchanged glances. Jennings' gray eyes were hard and straight. "All right," Toby agreed, after a pause, "I'll *borrow* the gasoline from you. I'll need three barrels. I can only fill the center and right wing tanks."

"Ours is in five-gallon tins. I'll send thirty of them up right away. Goodbye, Mr. Wayne. It's only a short walk to your plane, on the mesa."

TOBY was so blind angry as he strode out to the porch that he almost stumbled over an Indian servant woman. She was scrubbing a wide, dark brown stain from the porch floor. It looked to Toby very much like dried blood.

Toby went out to his plane to wait for the gasoline. Things were queer around this place. The Jennings girl—she was so beautiful that it left a man breathless—was a bundle of contradictions. Yesterday he had taken her for a young girl, in her teens. Today, he didn't know. She certainly had a regal air about her when she was angry.

But why were they all so worked up today? Bob Jennings was positively waspish when he talked to the Mexican; sounded as though he'd like to beat the man up.

Toby pulled the lower cowling, examined the solder joint he had made. With vibration constantly working on feed lines a solder joint was bad business. But he'd crack up rather than ask this Jennings for a piece of rubber tubing.

He saw a two-wheel Mexican cart approaching, flanked by a rider. It was the gasoline and Roberta Jennings seemed to be superintending the job.

Toby got out his chamois funnel, took the five-gallon tins handed up to him. He pretended not to see the girl.

She was in riding clothes now. From the corner of his eyes he watched the way she sat the horse. No English saddle for that girl.

"It takes a lot, doesn't it? Gasoline."

"Forty-eight an hour," Toby said, tossing an empty can off to one side.

"Gallons?"

"Naturally."

"Well, you needn't bark. It must be grand—flying."

Toby looked up to see if she was being sarcastic. Their eyes met and held. Suddenly confused, she started bending the short quirt looped over a tanned little wrist. "Mr. Wayne, I guess we haven't acted very nice this morning. Bob and I."

"Not very. What happened to your father's arm?"

"Didn't you hear the shooting? You must have! One of the peons was killed—lung shot. And Bob got his forearm grooved, dragging him inside the house."

"Hey! I thought I dreamed that. About the shots."

"Honestly?" she asked, her face changing. "But you *were* dead beat out, weren't you. Bob . . . Dad, said once that he bet you were in there hiding under the bed." She paused, studying him. "Mr. Wayne, I have a feeling we owe you an apology."

"You're right you do. What was it, bandits?"

She nodded, twisting the quirt with angry fingers. "They shot poor Juan; he didn't even have a gun."

"Did they get anything?"

"About eighteen thousand. In gold-silver transport bricks. They shot him through the lungs."

"Aren't you going to do something about it?"

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"Do something!" she repeated, turning her anger on him. "Every sound horse we've got is out after them. There's only one trail they can take." She pointed to the northwest. "Bob would have gone, but he couldn't stand a hard ride with that arm. He'd just slow things up."

Toby dumped in the last tin of gas. He studied the half cup of rusty water caught by the chamois skin. "Do you know how fast this thing will fly?"

She shook her head.

"A hundred and seventy, top speed. Doesn't that spell anything to you?"

"You mean you could find them from the air?"

He snapped his fingers. "Like that. If you know what direction they went."

She pointed again. "That's the only way they could go. This place is walled in with cliffs." The first eagerness left her. "But what good would it do, just seeing them from the air?"

"That's right," Toby admitted, screwing on the gas tank caps. "If we had a machine gun, or a few strafing bombs . . ." He climbed down from the wing. He went back, absentmindedly examining the patched rudder. He would have to have a new cover job on the old hack before he could get a States NC license for it. He looked at the alphabetical Mexican identification on the wings. He had grown to hate it, a symbol of his failure.

HE HEARD the dry squeak of saddle leather and looked up as the girl moved her pony over near him. Their eyes met again, without embarrassment. "What do they call you?" he asked. "Your friends?"

"My very good friends? They call me Bobby."

He pulled his eyes from her face. Her tone had warned him. Airplane pilots craved liquor or women or both. And what did he want? He wanted to get his hands on a Mexican who . . . "Your father has dynamite, hasn't he?" Toby asked suddenly. "For the mine."

"Dynamite," she said, making a contemptuous gesture. "People who know nothing about dynamite think—"

He stopped her, excitement growing in him. "Sister, I know more about dynamite than you think. Send those hombres down for a case of it. And a box of detonators. No fuse. And you scoot down to the cookhouse and bring back a sack of empty cans. Half gallon or gallon size."

She knew how to take orders—and give them. The two Mexicans started their team off at a clumsy gallop. She flanked them, laying her quirt on their rumps.

"Showing off," Toby muttered, grinning. "Wonder how old she really is?" He started gathering a pile of rocks, half the size of his fist.

She carried dynamite to him from the case they had brought and opened. She watched him put a layer of the rocks in an empty, half-gallon peach can, two detonator caps on these, tamped dynamite, and more caps and rocks. Then he squeezed the can edges together. He looked up from slitting dynamite. "You clear out," he said.

"Poof! I'm not afraid of dynamite."

"Ever get a dynamite headache, sister?'

She fingered her quirt. "If you call me sister again you're going to feel this across your face."

She walked over to her horse and after awhile, when he looked up from the work, she was gone and the Mexicans had left with their men. He wished then that he hadn't been so abrupt. He felt a queer sort of loneliness. It was something like being homesick.

He had finished a dozen of the cans when Bob Jennings rode onto the mesa. "What's up?" he demanded.

Toby motioned to the northwest. "Want to take a look-see for those bandits?"

The mine owner turned from him to the case of powder. "And dynamite them?" he asked, in a hard voice. "I'd like nothing better. Can you shoot?"

"Expert pistol; Army."

"Target stuff," Jennings commented and wheeled his horse.

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Toby dragged a rope from under the freight compartment tarpaulin and made the tin-can bombs and what remained of the case of dynamite secure to ring bolts. He had the motor going by the time Jennings got back with a rifle and two automatics.

"Where's Miss Jennings?" Toby inquired.

"Now look here, Wayne, don't get any funny notions about—" he stopped himself. "She's probably down at the house."

As he took off the mesa field, Jennings sitting beside him in the jump seat, Toby wondered why he was doing this. Both the mine owner and his daughter treated him as though he had leprosy. The old man got sore if he even spoke the girl's name. Why should he try to help them?

Jennings pointed to the trail leading northwest. "They'd have to stay on that for anyway sixty miles," he shouted. "Unless they want to climb one of these mountains. That wouldn't get them any place."

"When did this shooting take place?" Toby asked.

"Didn't you look at your watch?"

"My watch was stolen. Anyway I didn't hear them."

"You didn't hear them, eh?" Jennings voice was sardonic. "Listen, Wayne, a dead man would have heard that ruckus. One of 'em even took a shot through your window."

Toby remembered that round, crack-webbed hole in the bedroom window. No wonder this man sneered at him. He didn't remember what he'd said last night in his half-conscious chatterings, but if Jennings thought he had hidden out from the gun fight that alone was enough to account for his attitude.

"All right, I heard them. I was hiding under the bed. But when did it happen?"

"Don't know exactly. Sometime before midnight."

Toby didn't know much about saddle horses. "How far would they be now?"

"Forty to sixty miles. All depends. They've got about fifteen hundred pounds of metal, remember."

TOBY climbed to higher altitude, till he was above the level of the mountains and could see into the canyons on each side. They spotted a large group of horsemen in the main canyon trail. Jennings' first excitement over these died as they rapidly overhauled the ground party. "My men," he explained.

Presently the canyon they had been following widened into the west slope of Sonora. Toby swept his hand across the spread of windshield, indicating the plain below them. Through the clear desert air they could have seen a horseman thirty miles away in any direction.

Jennings scratched his head. "We've missed them," he decided. "And if we missed them my riders'll miss them, too. That Caballero Negro's smarter than I thought."

"Caballero Negro?"

"Yeah. Their leader. He must've holed up some place along the valley edge."

"That means Black Gentleman?"

"Could mean that. But all old-time Spanish gentlemen were mounted. It's a fancy way of saying the Black Rider." Jennings made a grab for a side brace as the ship heeled over in a vertical turn. "What're you doing new?"

"He wears a black hat?"

"Yeah. Big black sombrero with a lot of fancy work on it. That's why he took the name. But how'd you know?"

Toby's mouth was grim. "That's the one who kicked me in the ribs. I think there's more than one way of getting into your valley, Mr. Jennings."

They were over the valley again. Jennings pointed to a notch in the south wall of the mountain, black cliff apron below it. "That's a waterfall in the rainy season. Better than a four-hundred-foot drop."

"Ever looked it over closely in dry season?"

Jennings' silence was an admission that he hadn't.

Toby followed the crooked line of the canyon in a zigzag course, trying to see under the overhang of rock walls. He was

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suprised at the short time required to reach the east-trending side canyon where he had been forced down. Here the main gorge split into many branches. Toby made a wide circle, trying to search the branches. It was a hopeless task.

"You'll never find him in those canyons," Jennings shouted.

Toby nodded. He was sniffing the air in the cabin, frowning at the faint odor that might be only his imagination.

"We might as well go back, Wayne. But it was worth a try."

Toby had his head down low, close to the instrument board.

"What's wrong?"

Toby brought his head up from the stooped position.

"What's wrong?" Jennings demanded again.

"Get back into the cabin," Toby ordered. "Strap yourself down tight."

He turned the gasoline selector valve to "off." The engine started popping on what gas remained in the lines. Toby swung south again, toward the narrow bench where he'd had the other forced landing. He cut his switches and studied the country five thousand feet below, trying to get an indication of wind direction.

"What happened?"

Toby pointed to a damp place widening on the floor boards ahead of their feet. "Blown back from that patched feed line," he said. "Do as I told you and don't bother me."

"I'll take it here," Jennings decided.

"You're a fool if you do." Toby's voice sounded loud, with the engine dead. He tried to judge a thousand feet over the bench and brought it around for a three-sixty landing.

He held it at a moderate gliding speed, feeling the jerks of vertical air currents. A dead-stick landing takes a nicety of judgment, even in flat country.

Toby was aware of the other man sitting tensely beside him, watching his movements on the controls. He wished that Jennings would go back into the cabin. Then he dismissed Jennings from his mind. This job would take everything he had.

HE JERKED the side window open, listening to the thin whisper of wind around the struts. He judged his last turn to come in high over the east end of the bench. A current of hot air shoved him upward. He dropped the right wing and shoved left rudder for a slip. Immediately he struck a cool, down-trending air current and flattened to save his altitude. You can always lose altitude with a side-slip, but with dead motor you can never regain it.

They were down to a hundred feet and too high to get the full length of the bench. It was short enough at best. Toby dropped the wing again, felt an upward surge and jammed the stick hard over. Air rushed through the opened side window like water into a stove-in boat. He was much too high.

He jerked the stick back, keeping it in the corner, stalling; the plane was in a nose-high side-slip. If he over-shot they'd go rolling down a thirty-foot break, a hot engine in their laps, an airplane wrapped around them. And as though that wasn't enough there was the dynamite in the freight compartment.

Twenty feet high and they were almost to the landing end of the bench. He could feel her dropping. The landing gear would never take that impact. He flattened wings, dipped the nose, leaving rudder on for a fish-tail. A quick back-jerk of stick and full opposite rudder to straighten her.

They were on the ground and stopped with fifty feet to spare. Toby felt good. He felt proud of himself. "Guess I'm beginning to learn how to fly," he said.

Jennings looked at him, not understanding the quick elation that comes to a pilot after a thing like this. "Yeah," he said. "And now what?'

Toby got out of the ship for a smoke. Jennings followed him. He grudgingly took the cigarette Toby offered. He nodded toward the plane. "That flying—must take a little of courage. I was scared blue."

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"Pink. I was scared pink." Toby grinned. "You're a stubborn guy, Jennings. You'll always believe I hid under the bed last night. I'm going down and look for tracks. Tracks leading *out* of the main canyon."

"You still think that bunch went through there?"

Toby shrugged. "We'd be in a nice spot now if they rounded the bend down there. Twenty to two."

"I'll go with you."

"Wait for me."

They both whirled around at the voice.

"Roberta! What in—how the thunder did you get here?"

Roberta Jennings had both hands up, smoothing her hair. She was making a desperate attempt at composure. "I—I had the boys lead my horse back. I just happened to be under that canvas. I—"

"Young lady, you're not too old yet for a paddling. A damned good paddling!"

Toby held his face straight. "Exactly what she needs. I'm going down and look for tracks while you do it."

He came back, almost immediately, mounting the slope in quick, zigzag rushes. "They're coming! A mile or so down the canyon. The sound carries plain."

"Get those guns out! Roberta, you hide—"

"Jennings, listen! We wouldn't have a chance."

"Want to run for it, eh, you stuffed shirt. We're goin' to stay here and take care of this girl. Both of us."

Toby ignored him; he was inside the freight compartment. "Take this dynamite," he commanded. "I'm giving orders here, Jennings. Not you."

Jennings took the cans of dynamite.

"Those have detonators in them," Toby warned. He came out last, carrying the half case of dynamite.

"See that outcropping?" He put his arm over the girl's shoulder, turning her body, pointing. "That overlooks the main canyon. Can you shoot a rifle?"

"I can," Jennings offered.

Wayne scowled.

"Not with that arm in a sling. It'll take pretty good shooting. A hundred yards, and hit one of the tin cans."

"Bobby can do that, all right."

"Of course I can," the girl said, very quietly.

"Carry some of these bombs over with her. Don't throw 'em unless they try to rush me. There'll be two cans I'll want you to shoot at. Don't shoot till I holler. The south can or the north can. D'you get it?"

"No. What—"

"Think it over while you're getting there. I've no time to lose explaining."

THEY watched him start over the edge of the bench, the dynamite hugged to his chest. Loose rock skidded from under him. He slid twenty feet down the steep slope on his back, tin cans rattling on top of the dynamite.

"He put rocks and detonators in those," the girl said, hands clenched tightly at her breast.

Jennings' face was working queerly. "You take this other pistol, Bobby. We'll do as he says."

They made slow progress, up the slope from the bench, then around the shoulder of the mountain and down to the outcrop of basalt. Roberta carried the rifle and her father carried four of the smallest cans, using his arm sling for a basket and taking the punishment of the sharp edges cutting into raw flesh.

When they finally got out on the rock they could see the flyer below them. A few hundred yards around the turn they saw horsemen, coming at a slow, tired walk. Jennings counted them. "Twenty-four," he said. "See the black-hat leading them?"

"Can you tell if they have the gold?"

"On those pack horses, most likely. Must have been quite a job getting it up that cliff. Look! Wayne's pointing."

Her voice was trembling a little now, but her hand was steady.

Roberta pulled the rifle lever to see if there was a shell in the barrel. "That's

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one's nearest the mine. That's the north can, isn't it?"

"Right. Take a sight on it, Bobby. Remember: a deep breath, then let out part of it. Squeeze, don't jerk the trigger."

"Keep still, Bob. I'm nervous as a cat already."

"It's only a target, kid. You can shoot twice that good. There's the south can. See? He's keeping still. Wants to surprise them."

"Will we be able to hear him, Bob?"

"Get yourself in hand, kid! Of course we will. You can hear those horses, can't you?"

"Somebody's taking some big chances around here, Bob. And it's not you nor me."

"Your dad's gettin' old, Bobby. He used to be able to judge men."

"Remember, last night? He kept saying, 'Everybody wants something.' He hates Mexicans."

"He was out of his head, baby. Quit talking!"

"There's nothing wrong with me, is there, Dad? There's no reason why—"

Her father interrupted, looking at her sharply, as if she had just told him something new and interesting.

"Bobby, your mother was the best woman in the world. Much too good for me. Watch! He's got both hands up in the air!"

"Buenos dias, señor." The voice carried up to them distinctly. It was pleasant; composed.

The horsemen stopped. There was an uneasy silence.

Toby's arm started to lower, slowly. He was talking in Spanish, keeping his voice level. "Back of you, Señor Caballero Negro, is enough dynamite to blow you and your gang to hell. In front of you there is also dynamite. And there is dynamite under all those boulders around you. I would advise you not to move."

SILENCE followed. The Mexican pushed the sombrero from straight black bangs of hair. He looked about him uneasily. His right hand left the bridle reins, started slowly toward his hip.

"No! No, *señor!* You are covered with rifles." The American pointed to the other side of the canyon.

The Mexican threw his head back, laughter rumbling in his chest. "That is a fine story, *señor*. You should frighten the Caballero Negro, eh? You are one big damn fool, *señor.*"

"Shoot the north can," Toby ordered, barely raising his voice. He stooped down behind the protection of a boulder.

Nothing happened.

The Mexican turned to his men, teeth flashing with amusement.

The canyon floor lifted behind them. Thunder rolled out, to cover the sharp crack of a rifle. Split rocks whined through the air. One man pitched forward from the saddle. Three horses were down. There was a high, nickering scream of pain.

Toby's voice flailed out in a crackle of words.

"Watch out! There's more of it. Do you want more?"

"Señor ! Señor! Compasión!"

Toby waited, his body dripping with sweat. "Shoot that horse!" he commanded, no longer able to stand the animal's suffering.

A rifle cracked from above. The horse's head twisted and was quiet.

"Start throwing your guns down. Watch out they don't hit that dynamite!" Toby raised his voice: "Up there on the rocks —one of you men come down here. You, Jennings!"

Jennings' figure rose from behind the rocks above them.

Toby watched them disarm in frantic haste. He wanted to laugh now. He was shaking all over.

TOBY guarded the two outlaws who put the wounded man in the freight compartment, where the gold and weapons were already stowed away. He and Jennings had made the bandits do this work, and unsaddle their horses and turn them loose.

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They grouped the Mexicans closely around the pile of tin can bombs that remained. "If they try any funny business, Jennings, just take a pot-shot at those bombs. You won't have to bother sending your men after them then."

Jennings nodded, looked up at the sun. "Can you get your kite patched up in time, Wayne?"

"I can try," Toby said listlessly, walking slowly toward the airplane. His feet seemed like dead. He had that feeling he got after a long, tough flight. A limp, all-gone feeling.

An enervating, pervasive soul-weariness . . .

But it was worse than flight exhaustion, he thought. It was the strangest feeling he'd ever had. He'd wanted something. Wanted it with everything he had. Now it was his. If he wanted to he could go over and kick that Mexican's face in. But he didn't want to. Everybody wants something. But when they get it—well, they'd just as well cut the switches and call it a day.

"I'll help you."

"That's all right, Miss Jennings. You'll get yourself dirty."

"I might as well learn now. If you're going to take a job flying Bob's gold, you needn't think you'll keep me away from this plane."

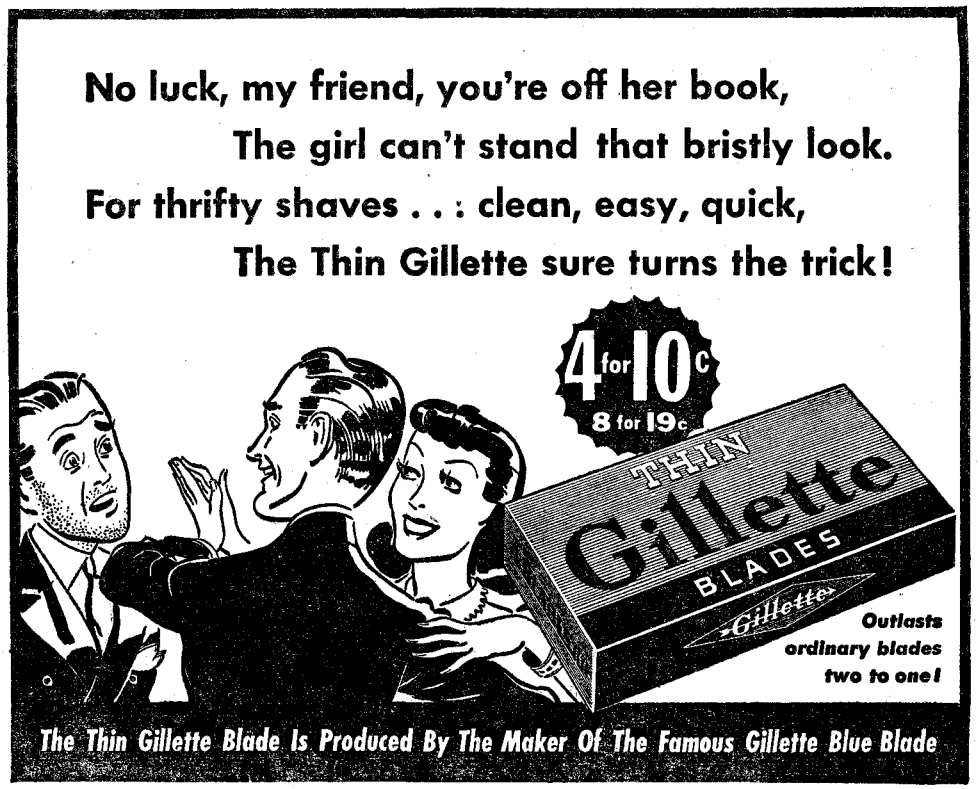
He was much taller than the girl. Standing near her that way, he found that his lips were just level with the massed, gleaming gold of her hair.

"Did I hear you say something about a job, Miss Jennings?'

"Don't be stuffy, Mr. Wayne. My very good friends call me Bobby."

"Bobby." He repeated the name, looking down at her red, smiling lips. "Bobby, I want—"

Her eyes, crinkled with amusement, carried half a promise. "We'd better get this plane fixed and all set to fly, Toby."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Mark leaped on the lion's back, raised his dagger, and prayed

Minions of Mars

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

WHEN the young American engineer MARK NEVIN, is given a newly discovered and tremendously powerful anaesthetic, he falls into a coma that lasts for six thousand years. Waking, he finds that the world has reverted to the savagery of prehistoric times.

OMEGA, a disembodied intelligence of extraordinary abilities and prankish disposition, decides that MARK shall be the father of the new human race OMEGA is interested in developing. MARK's blood has been changed by the anaesthetic, infused with a radiocative energy that renders him immune to the needs of ordinary mortals. When MARK falls in love with the girl NONA, OMEGA obligingly imparts this radioactive element to her blood, too.

MARK and NONA are separated when MARK falls into the sea during a storm. OMEGA assures NONA that MARK's tremendous strength and endurance will protect him and starts off to find him. NONA, distraught, decides that she had better follow OMEGA before he can lead MARK into some new trouble.

BUT MARK has managed to involve himself in difficulties even without OMEGA's aid. He becomes the leader of a rebellion in the Duchy of Scarbor, nominally ruled by DUKE JON, but really run by the greedy tyrant, ERLAYOK. MURF, a glib-tongued redhead from the tribe of Mics, is the chief conspirator of the revolt, but MARK is not entirely convinced that MURF's motives are purely disinterested.

Before he can investigate further, MARK finds himself arrested on charges of treason and sentenced to participate in the brutal harvest games in the city's arena.

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OMEGA visits him in jail, and together they plan to build a machine that will erect a boundary of fear around the duchy, thus eliminating the possibility of invasion and the necessity of maintaining the huge standing army whose upkeep holds the population in poverty and misery.

Before MARK can finish the machine, his turn to appear in the arena comes. MARK is more or less disturbed to discover that instead of vigorous rough and tumble, he is expected to engage in mortal combat, armed only with a puny knife, with a huge and ferocious lion. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAPPY WARRIOR

SOLDIERS stood behind the three other victims, ready to force them into the arena. But it wasn't necessary. The iron door swung open and the four stepped out. Mark looked around to see where the lion was coming from, but it was impossible to tell. There were doors on all sides of the enclosure and the lion might be dispatched through any one of them.

The other three evidently reasoned the same way, for they immediately went toward the center of the pit. That point was the farthest away from all the doors.

Mark followed slowly, tossing his dagger aloft and catching it dexterously by the handle. He didn't feel nearly as sure of himself as he looked, but at least he was making a nice impression.

He reached the place in the middle of the pit where the other three were standing, and went on toward Erlayok's box.

He guessed that the lion wouldn't be loosed immediately. The crowd would be first given a display of the breaking nerves of the victims, waiting for a rending, slashing death to claim them. Mark was spoiling the show, if that was what they were expecting.

His nonchalant tossing and catching of the dagger not only attracted every eye in the stands, but served to somewhat calm the nerves of the other three. They watched him too, though they were also watching out for the entrance of the lion.

"Erlayok," called Mark, loud enough for a good portion of the stands to hear.

"After I kill this lion, will you meet me down here in a man-to-man combat? My dagger against whatever weapons you wish?"

Erlayok's face worked as he listened to the yells of the spectators. The majority, it seemed, were delighted with the proposal. Mark tried to maintain a noncommittal appearance, but some of them had gleams in their eyes which might have meant that they also approved.

Jon openly clapped his hands. Erlayok's eyes darted from side to side, as if trying to memorize the faces of as many as possible of those who would like to see him in the pit.

"Loose the lion!" he roared suddenly.

MARK laughed and turned back toward the other men. The lion came, and as Mark had earlier suspected, it came from one of the doors quite close to the one from which he and the others had emerged. The odor had been too strong for the lion cages to be at any great distance.

The arrangement had apparently been made so that the slaughter would take place very close to the nobles' seats. The commoners were way out by left field, so to speak, with the sun in their eyes.

Three of the victims ran with all their might directly away from the big cat, and their flight took them right toward the boxes of the nobles. But the fourth didn't!

Casually Mark strode toward the door from which the lion emerged. For a moment the beast seemed to be bewildered, not sure what to do with his new-found freedom. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air, turning his head to take in the whole arena. Then he froze, sighting Mark. Mark was by far the biggest and most appetizing of the four, and that lion knew good flesh from skin and bones when he saw it.

Mark tensed. In spite of his peculiar endowment, he was a man, and man in-

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stinctively feels a surge of fear when facing the king of beasts. And this one was a peculiarly savage and unpleasant specimen. He was obviously hungry, and his hide quivered over quite visible ribs.

Leo crouched, his tail twitching. He opened his fanged mouth to give the roar which would strike terror to the heart of this brash human. At that moment Mark snapped out of it. This, he figured, was the moment when his opponent should spring, and it was during this moment when he must make the move which would win the battle.

And his guess was right.

As the soul-chilling roar rent the air, the bunched muscles of the crouching beast extended themselves in the leap which should have brought the puny man beneath the outstretched claws. In that split second Mark leaped forward also and swerved just out of the path of those slashing talons. Like the broken-field runner he once was, he wheeled suddenly as the lion passed him.

A prodigious leap carried him astride the lion's back, the fingers of one hand buried in his mane. His knees dug into the beast's sides and he clung like a leech.

Startled, the lion reared. He received a series of annoying stabs through the shoulder muscles for his pains. Then he tried rolling on his back. This move almost broke Mark's ribs, but he hung on.

"Whoa, Bessie!" Mark howled. He was stabbing repeatedly in a number of places within the reach of his hand, trying to find the beast's heart. But either he was missing the spot, or the dagger was too short, for the animal continued his frantic efforts to throw him off.

Then suddenly the lion succeeded! After rolling over for the third time, he came to his feet and gave a convulsive leap. It was a move Mark had failed to anticipate. The beast's back bowed and then abruptly arched, tearing the clinging man's knee-hold loose.

Mark landed sitting, the dagger torn from his hand. He was on his feet instantly, facing the lion.

He could see the hilt of the knife, almost invisible in the folds of flesh beneath the animal's shoulder. If he could duplicate his former acrobatic feat when the beast leaped again, he would be able to retrieve it and continue stabbing.

Then suddenly he realized it wasn't necessary. The lion didn't crouch for another leap. It weaved unsteadily for a moment, then collapsed, dead! The little knife had found its mark.

Mark reached over and drew it out of the carcass, wiping it on the animal's mane.

A TUMULT arose from the stands. People were standing on their seats and cheering wildly. Mark bowed and then started for Erlayok's box. The stadium quieted as he approached.

"Are you going to accept that challenge?" Mark called. "Your sword is surely equal to my dagger. Lower your fat down off that perch, and let your people see how brave you are."

Another clamor arose. By this time the Earl had recovered his poise. He smiled as if amused at the offer.

"You wish to give the crowd some more entertainment, of course," he said. "It would be another crime to add to your record if you are making this challenge only for the purpose of doing harm to a noble of the Land of the Brish. Therefore I assume that you really have a better motive in mind. You wish to entertain the populace gathered here. Am I right?"

Mark saw what was coming, but there was nothing he could do about it. If he answered any way but the affirmative, he would be another crime to add to your him. And that would mean that instead of going free at the end of these games, he would have to stand trial once more. And that might seriously interfere with his plans.

"I wish only to entertain these good people," he said. "But I am sure that can be best accomplished in the way I suggest. You have boasted of being able to handle me by yourself. Come down and prove it!"

"It *has* been proved," claimed Erlayok.

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"I handled you once before. But there is another way you can do service to the citizens assembled here." He paused and looked about him, benignly. A murmur arose, but Mark couldn't tell what it meant. Erlayok continued: "You will be given the axe which was taken from you when you were imprisoned. With it you may demonstrate your skill against five of my best warriors!"

There was no doubt of the meaning of the shouts which followed. The spectators wanted more blood. It didn't matter to them that Mark had entertained them well already. They were perfectly willing to see him slaughtered as long as the sport was worth watching. Mark thought back to the vagaries of the prize-fight crowds he had seen in years when there had been prize-fights. Human nature hadn't changed much. A mob was still a mob. The lowest form of disorganized humanity.

The shriek of a siren suddenly cut through the noise of the crowd's cheering. Mark saw that the sound came from a hand-operated contrivance in the announcer's box. He was pointing toward the loge of Jon, Duke of Scarbor. The Duke was standing, waiting for silence.

"People of Scarbor!" he began. "You are not living up to the principles of good sportsmanship for which our citizens are renowned. This man has earned the right to rest until tomorrow's games. The rules of the contests are so written."

The Duke sat down amidst a murmur of disappointment. But Erlayok rose and waved his hands. When the crowd again became silent he bowed in the direction of the Duke and smiled a sardonic smile.

"We must not forget that this man volunteered to entertain once more today," he reminded, turning toward Mark. "Is that not your desire?"

Mark noticed a certain anxiety appear on the face of Jon. That made him feel a lot better. He bowed deeply toward the ornate loge. He saw an opportunity of turning the capricious favor of the crowd. A favor which appeared for the moment to be directed toward Erlayok.

"I shall fight," he announced, "for I know that the good Duke wishes to see his subjects amused. Only his high sense of justice moves him to give me a chance to reconsider. Long live the Duke!"

THE tumult which followed made all former cheering sound feeble. Among those present in the arena were people from all parts of the duchy. And Mark wanted Jon's popularity to be increased. For the popularity of the Duke in no way interfered with the coming rebellion. The majority of the people already knew of the Duke's efforts to alleviate oppression, and they had no antagonism for him.

Their hatred was centered on the nobles who nullified those efforts. It was important, however, that these contests not reflect any advantage to the nobles. And taking the credit for this coming battle away from Erlayok was a step in the right direction.

In a few minutes the carcass of the king of beasts had been dragged away, and fresh sand sprinkled over the spot where his blood had made the ground slippery. The three men whose lives had been spared by Mark's victory were herded back into the prisoners' quarters under the stands. They were afforded a reprieve until tomorrow's games would again place their lives in jeopardy.

A door opened beneath the box where Erlayok and his women sat. Out marched five of the most formidable men Mark had seen since coming to the Land of the Brish. Or ever.

Two of them were about Mark's size. The other three were bigger and much heavier. Their thickset bodies were protected by the steel breastplates which were standard equipment of the soldiers of this land. And each carried a dirk in the left hand, in addition to a broad battleaxe. Mark's own axe and dagger looked puny and ineffectual by comparison.

As they came toward him it was apparent that they had hastily formulated a plan of action before entering the arena. They spread out crescent-like, obviously

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intent upon circling him. Confidence was mirrored on their faces. One of them even looked embarrassed.

Mark had never seen these men before, but no doubt they had been told of his ability. He foresaw their clumsy attempt to surround him, and leaped instantly into action. The warrior on the far left was one of the larger three. As Mark sprang toward him he snarled and aimed his ponderous weapon in a sweeping slash at Mark's neck. Mark checked his rush just enough to let it whistle past.

For the instant the warrior was completely helpless as the momentum of his swing turned him halfway around. That instant was his last. Mark's flashing axe caught him in exactly the spot he had intended to strike Mark. His severed jugular pumped a crimson, gushing stream.

The speed with which it was done made the spectators gasp. Sudden cheers went up. All sorts of advice was shouted, most of it inexpert and all of it quite useless. They might as well have been shouting: "Moider dat bum!"

But it was not as simple as all that. These warriors were not tyros. When the first man had gone down, they knew immediately that there was a serious business ahead of them. And they took no foolish chances.

Their adversary had shown a speed that no single one of them could match. They gave up their tactics of spreading out and trying to encircle him. That system gave his superior speed a chance to pick them off one by one. Instead they closed up and attacked him in a body. The two center men engaged him in a furious attack while the two outer ones kept pecking at him and trying to get far enough to the sides to deliver blows he could not ward off.

Back across the arena the battle waged, Mark giving ground to prevent the maneuver from being completed. He made sudden leaps to the side from time to time in an effort to get a second or two in which he would be facing only one man.

But each time he tried this, the man he had singled out for individual attack moved back to join the others. Mark was continually facing the massed front of the four.

THE fierce tempo of the battle kept the audience in an uproar. But even above the shouts of the crowd, the ringing impact of axe on axe could be heard with the regularity of a triphammer.

An occasional rasping, spine-chilling shriek rent the air as a parried axe slid across the blade of a dagger. This was always followed by a clanging thud, for the sound only came when one of the warriors expertly used his dirk to deflect Mark's axe so that it struck futilely against his breastplate.

Mark's dagger was almost useless, being several inches shorter than those of Erlayok's men, and too light to use for such a purpose.

Once a roar arose which drowned out all other sound as Mark countered an axe-swing which he had managed to duck, and used his dirk in a backhand stab. The soldier who received it suddenly sprang back from the mêlée, clutching a thigh. But he was back again in a minute.

Mark had felt his dirk sheath itself in the man's leg. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen the man retire. But the remaining three, also seeing the odds go down, pressed him with renewed vigor. For a few minutes he was so busy dodging and countering that he was forced to keep every sense alert to avoid the three. When the injured men returned to the battle he came from the rear, and Mark had no warning of his coming.

Fortunately for him the snarling soldier on his right aimed a terrific axe-blow at his head at that precise moment. And the man in front lunged forward, aiming for his middle. Mark smacked aside the head-blow with his own axe, and was forced to leap to the left and backward to avoid being disemboweled by the other man. At that instant a battleaxe flashed downward through the spot he had just vacated. The blow would have split him from crown to groin.

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From that instant the tide of battle changed. The descending axe buried itself in the ground at Mark's side. Mark's left hand was brushed by the hair of the man who had wielded it. The man had been carried forward and down by the force of the blow. Mark was only half aware that the sable wings of death had almost enfolded him.

He was too busy with the men facing him to permit his attention to waver for an instant. But nevertheless the contact of that hair with his hand caused a reflex in Mark's perfectly trained body. His hand twisted and the dirk drove a slanting course from a point beneath the right ear, burying itself to the hilt. The man slumped, lifeless.

Mark left the dagger where it was. He had no further use for it.

Now the odds were really three to one. And for Mark that meant virtually an even battle. If anything, slightly in his favor. It was almost certain that he could prevent them from inflicting any telling damage. With the four he had been in constant danger that one of them would maneuver far enough to the side to deliver a blow he couldn't block. Several such blows, in fact, had already landed. And though they had all been flesh wounds, instantly healed, there had been the ever-present possibility that one of them would cleave his brain and do damage that couldn't be repaired.

But now that risk was gone. No three men lived who could move fast enough to get around him. And the battle was speedily going in his favor for an entirely different reason.

These warriors were powerful men and well trained, but they were, after all, only men, and subject to natural exhaustion.

And the longer they wielded their heavy axes, the more they tired. Gone was their strategy and coördination. They no longer seemed to have any plan of battle. Each man was concentrating on his own survival and vainly hoping one of the others would manage to bring down this dancing demon.

Mark, by contrast, was as fresh and flashy as yellow daisies in a meadow. For he was tapping the energy waves given off from the slowly disintegrating radioactive element in his blood. It was a source of power which provided more energy than he could possibly use by physical exercise. He was eternally fresh and untiring; while his opponents showed their fatigue in their twisted faces and in their gulping gasps for air.

ABRUPTLY Mark leaped backward several steps. Dazed, the panting three plodded after. Their eyes were fixed dully, hopelessly upon him. They knew they were doomed but kept coming, determined to fight as long as they could move. Mark kept backing away, keeping them at a safe distance.

"Erlayok's got you into this," he told them, talking rapidly. "He knew what would happen. Why not get back at him while there is still a chance?" Their dazed eyes told him nothing. He continued, speaking only loud enough for them to hear. "I'm taking you toward his box. When you get close enough, throw your axes at him. You're going to die anyway. Do something useful while you're about it. He had no mercy on you, knowing that you were certain to be defeated."

But the idea backfired. If Mark had hypnotized them, they would have obeyed his suggestion. But they were fighting men, following the orders of their master, and he wouldn't take that advantage. Otherwise he could have ended the contest long ago.

As it was his suggestion about throwing their axes gave one of them an idea. Mark suddenly found himself dodging the flying weapon of the largest of the three remaining warriors. It had been accurately thrown, but lightning reflexes came to his rescue.

It passed safely over his head.

Still retreating, Mark scooped it up and heaved it back. He aimed it low and it landed where he intended. The blade cut deep into the man's leg, below the knee,

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and down he went—permanently out of the battle.

Neither of the remaining two was willing to chance the loss of his weapon. They continued to press forward. Mark, with a burst of speed, dashed toward them and to the left. They turned to face him, sluggishly. The maneuver placed one behind the other. The man in front raised his axe to deliver a blow. But the blow never landed.

With a movement so fast that it appeared that his arm blurred for an instant, he brought the flat of his axe down on the man's biceps. The cumbersome battle-axe thudded to the ground, the arm which had wielded it broken.

The last man stared stupidly, too far gone to offer any resistance. His axe dangled loosely in his hand. Mark, suddenly pitying him, stepped forward and let him have his left fist on the point of the jaw. The man dropped like an ox.

The crowd cheered wildly.

Mark sensed that it approved his actions in sparing the lives of the last three men. The spectators were bloodthirsty, but these three had put up a fine battle, and deserved better than death. The thought that man retained some mercy in his make-up pleased Mark immensely. His actions, however, wouldn't have been changed even if the mob had been crying for the blood of these three.

CHAPTER XVII

NIGHT PROMENADE

MARK WATCHED the rest of the day's bloody program from the prisoners' quarters beneath the stands. After a while he became inured to the barbarities he saw. They ceased to make his blood boil as they had at first. It was like the pity one might feel when witnessing for the first time a scene in an abattoir. After a certain number of repetitions, the thing seems to be devoid of any reality in the way of pain or suffering. There is also the realization that such things must be and that there was nothing could be done about it.

But there was a difference. For although Mark realized that there was nothing he could do at the present time, nor for years to come, he also knew that if his plans were successful, there would certainly be a lesser demand for such exhibitions in the future.

Eventually the last contest was finished and a weary, sated crowd made for the exits. For the moment they'd reached their limit, but they would be back in the morning, keener than ever.

Mark dived into his work that night with a new determination.

His zeal, however, seemed to have no bearing on his work. The solution of the problem eluded him as it had the night before. When morning came and the first rays of the sun told him that he would shortly have to return to the arena, he was as far from success as he had been when he started. Further, in one way. When he had begun this work there had been several ideas in his mind, several methods he could use to attack the problem. Since then he had tried them all, and failed consistently.

The second day at the arena passed drearily. He didn't make the mistake of letting himself in for a double performance. One was enough. It left him as near nauseated as it was possible for him to be.

A dozen of the most hardened criminals —and he among them—were chosen for a battle royal. The announcer was particular to state that it was a battle to the death. Mark suspected that this was a device of Erlayok's to insure that every man involved would do his best to do away with Erlayok's pet hate, Mark. The battle was conducted without any but nature's weapons, and the fact gave Mark a chance to thwart the Earl's designs. He went to work furiously, knocking men unconscious, and occasionally breaking arms. One particularly tough specimen gave so much trouble that he was obliged to break a leg.

So thoroughly and swiftly did he work at the business of putting men out of the

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battle without actually killing them, that only one of the other eleven was killed. The killer later received the one broken leg in the event. And the crowd was just as pleased as if gore had run by the bucketful.

Mark saw Erlayok's frown and grinned as he left the arena. He gave the grin for the sole purpose of infuriating the Earl, who was looking at him. He wanted Erlayok to know that he had been outwitted.

INSIDE, he didn't feel at all like grinning. His performance had left a bad taste in his mouth. Knocking men cold didn't bother him. They fell without a sound. But those who had grappled with him and forced him to wrestle and finally break bones, had spoiled his equanimity.

It is seldom that a bone is broken without being accompanied by an involuntary scream of pain. Those screams, and the moaning and groaning which followed got under his skin. Today, as never before, Mark conceived an active distaste for dealing out physical punishment. Never before had he gone about such a task in cold blood as he had today.

That evening, as the throbbing of the curfew faded and died, he again threw his energy into the seemingly endless task of duplicating the hypnosis wave. His only progress had been negative. He had proved that none of his ideas were feasible. Every one had resulted in failure. Several times he had produced vibrations which had almost shaken the prison down on him, but they were useless, and taught him nothing. The extremely short wave which he needed seemed impossible to produce mechanically.

And on this night he seemed to be getting no nearer a solution. He tried several variations of the ideas he had worked on previously and accomplished nothing of value. Finally in disgust he tossed a wrench he had been using directly into the middle of the latest hookup he had contrived. There was a short series of popping sounds as a bank of delicate vacuum tubes upset and exploded.

He gazed morosely at the wreckage, heedless of the damage he had done. "All right," he muttered. "Blow up. Collapse. Phooey!"

Abruptly he strode to the door into the guardroom and shoved it open. Edmun and Spud were dozing in their chairs, but awoke and jumped to their feet. The others weren't in sight.

"You two would be better off in bed," Mark growled. I sound, he thought, just like Aunt Nellie. Working too hard. Getting no place. Nuts.

"We've got to guard you," Spud explained. "So you don't escape."

Mark snorted. "Don't be silly."

Spud grinned cheerfully. "Sure. You'd just bend a few bars and walk out."

"Exactly," Mark answered. "So you might as well go to bed. *I'm* going out for a walk. I'll be back before morning. Don't lock the door after me."

The guards looked stupidly at each other as Mark drew the iron bolts of the outer door. As he went out and closed the door they shrugged and resumed their interrupted naps.

MARK walked briskly. He had no particular destination. He had decided on the walk because he though the cool night air might set his brain to working more clearly. He breathed great volumes of the stuff into his lungs, with no apparent effect. His brain didn't suddenly jump to the solution of his problem. If anything, his thoughts became the more chaotic. His mind kept leaping back to one after another of the experiments which had failed, trying to put a mental finger on the reason for the failure.

He was getting angry with himself. He shouldn't be fruitlessly rehashing his former ideas. He had proved they wouldn't work. But there seemed no other line of thought to pursue. The devices he had tried encompassed practically all that was known in his time concerning ultra-short waves. And yet some other attack to the problem was obviously indicated. But in

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what direction would he make the attack?

Abruptly he stopped taking the deep breaths. It had come to him why they weren't doing anything toward clearing his foggy brain. Deep breaths did nothing but oxygenate the blood. And since his blood had no particular use for oxygen, he was accomplishing nothing. There wasn't anything wrong with his brain anyway. It was working all right. The trouble was that he had allowed it to become enmeshed in a maze of circuitous thought. He would have to forget the whole problem. And when he came back to it later he might be able to tackle the thing from a new angle.

A flurry of motion in the block ahead of him brought him to an abrupt stop. Peering intently toward the spot, he discerned the forms of several men. The night watch!

He wheeled and retraced his steps, swiftly and silently. At the next corner he turned to the left and continued his rapid walking. The incident served to make him even angrier. For a second he contemplated turning back and doing battle with them. He was just in the proper mood to vent his feelings by cracking a few skulls. But he thought better of it when he considered the remote possibility that he wouldn't be able to cope successfully with a score of armed men, weaponless himself.

A few minutes after the turn-off he began to recognize where he was. A short distance from Smid's haberdashery, the rebel headquarters. He decided that as long as he was this close he would stop and say hello to Murf.

Above Smid's door was a small number plate, identical in appearance with a dozen others in the street. It had a peculiarity of its own, however. Members of a close circle of rebel leaders knew that it was attached to a cord which would ring a bell if the numberplate were pulled out from the wall. And if the proper number of pulls were made, at the proper intervals, Smid would open the door at any time of the day or night.

Mark gave the signal.

Smid peered through a peephole and then opened the door, his eyes wide with surprise. Mark slipped inside.

"Praise to the gods!" Smid exclaimed. "You managed to escape!"

Smid's welcome made Mark feel fine, and once more he understood that there were human beings after all among these savages.

Smid hurriedly led the way to the cellar where he awakened Murf, who was snoring gently in a cot. Murf opened one eye, saw Mark, then jumped to his feet. Delightedly he pumped Mark's hand. "I thought you'd never come," he said. "Any hue and cry?"

Mark smiled. "No, and there won't be any. I'm going back before morning."

CHAPTER XVIII

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

SMID'S jaw dropped and Murf began to sputter. Mark saw that he would have to explain. This he did, omitting to mention the incredible Omega. Nor did he tell anything about his own past, but explained his knowledge of the forces he was trying to control by saying that such things were known to the wise men of his own land. His confederates took him to mean Norway, and he didn't set them right. The explanation of the hypnosis wave was enough for uninitiated minds to absorb at one sitting. As they sat on the opposite side of a table, listening attentively, he marveled that they could accept even that much without challenging his veracity.

As he talked he saw that Smid's eyes gleamed with a patriotic fervor when he told of how the wave could be directed to enclose the Land of the Brish so that no enemy could attack. The man was envisioning his people freed of the burden of the parasitic armies which had bled them white for so long. His face was ecstatic at the thought.

Murf seemed not nearly so enthusiastic,

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He frowned when Mark said that the rebellion would best be delayed until he had finished his machines. Time would be needed to place the machines in strategic positions so that the many enemies of the Brish would be kept at bay while the rebels went about their task of ousting the nobles from authority.

Murf nodded unconsciously when Mark pointed out the fact that during the course of the rebellion the frontiers would be left inadequately guarded. Some of the nobles were certain to escape and muster their soldiers in an attempt to retake their strongholds. But when Mark went on to explain that the rebellion was less apt to blow up in their faces if the border was protected by the machines, Murf objected.

"I can't see it," he claimed. "If we place your machines in operation there will be no need for the nobles' forces to stay at the borders. And if they are brought back to the cities, our rebellion is hopeless. We'd be outnumbered ten to one."

Mark shook his head. "But we won't wait a minute after the machines are working," he said. "We'll attack immediately. The armies won't leave the borders, at least not many of them, because they won't know they aren't needed there."

"That's only guesswork," Murf said. "Spies and scouts are going back and forth across the borders all the time. From what you've told me, your machine will keep people from crossing the borders from either direction. The Brish will discover the barrier as quickly as the Mics."

Mark's eyes narrowed. Something in the way Murf had said that started him thinking along lines which weren't at all pleasant.

Why did he speak of the Brish in the third person? Mark remembered that Murf had done this before. Smid always said "we," or "our men." And why had Murf immediately spoken of the Mics? There was another border, on the north, and hundreds of miles of coastline involved.

Mark frowned. He didn't want to complete his uneasy thoughts. He liked Murf and couldn't forget that on more than one occasion the man had done him services and risked his life doing them.

SMID decided to voice an opinion. "I think that nothing of the sort will happen," he said. "Anyone approaching the barrier will be stricken with an overpowering sensation of fear. He won't be able to go on. Now do you think that a spy or scout will go back to his superiors and admit that he suddenly got a touch of cowardice? Most soldiers would desert before they would do that. Therefore, the only chance that the barrier will be discovered would be for a large body of men to try to cross it together. And that won't happen from our side of the lines. Our armies are purely defensive. We're too well hemmed in to launch an attack at any one point."

Mark grinned, forgetting his former thoughts. "That's an idea I hadn't considered," he told Smid. "I guess that just about clinches the argument. What about it, Murf?"

"It's a good point," Murf conceded. "When will the machines be completed?"

"I've been stuck for the last few days," Mark confessed. "But I hope to solve the problem before the end of the week."

"And how long will it take to construct enough of them to take care of the worst of the borders?"

"Another week at the most."

Murf looked at Smid triumphantly. "Can't be done," he said. "Our men are ready to start on a moment's notice, right now! All over the duchy our recruits have been instructed to keep themselves available for instant action. Right in this building are housed the dispatch riders who will round them up when I give the word. Three of them will notify our groups in the other duchies.

"Every man has his instructions where to get his arms and where to go from there. The whole thing has been timed and calculated to the second! Farmers, artisans and laborers from every corner of the country will proceed singly to the strategic points of attack we agreed upon.

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When they come together it will be a complete surprise to the nobles. We shall win!

"But we can't wait much longer. These mobilization orders were issued when you told me that you would escape as soon as possible. That was three days ago. Men can't be kept keyed up, waiting to risk their lives, forever. The attack must come very soon. Be reasonable!

"We have planned so well that it isn't likely the nobles will be able to get any word to the border armies. And if some of them do, they will leave enough of a force to slow up any attempted invasion. And what's the difference if there is a little fighting at the border? It would keep the army too busy to bother us."

For a long minute there was a heavy silence. Mark noticed that Smid seemed to have responded to Murf's logic. But the idea of fighting at the border didn't appeal to Mark.

He foresaw that if some of the border soldiers were recalled by the nobles, the remainder, knowing that rebellion was under way in the interior wouldn't be able to put up very good resistance. Soldiers like to know that there is unity and accord in the higher command which sends them to battle. Once those remaining soldiers got the idea that they might be forsaken by their own people; that reinforcements might fail to relieve them; and that food and other supplies might not be forthcoming when needed, they would be very apt to cut and run.

"You're right—in one respect," Mark said. "Men can't be kept keyed up indefinitely. So suppose you send your dispatch riders out the first thing in the morning. Have them pass the word for our men to relax and return to their normal occupations. But to keep themselves handy so that they may be given new orders in about two weeks. At that time we will give them two or three days' notice of the day of attack. Things will operate just as smoothly then as they would now. The delay will cause no harm to our plans, and there will be much less bloodshed."

"Two weeks!" Murf burst out. "Don't you realize that the holidays will be over then? We've planned on the present confusion helping us, making it hard for the nobles to round up their forces in time to stop us."

"That's a minor point when you think it over," Mark said. "We're going to strike the strongholds of all nobles at the same time. So confusion or no confusion, they won't be able to get help in time to stop us. When that help does come, we'll be in control."

Murf bit his lip and nodded. They had been figuring on the confusion helping them, but it wasn't such a great necessity. He couldn't very well claim that it was. It appeared that he had lost the argument. Mark would have his delay and the borders would be protected before the attack was made.

Mark saw that he had won, and at the same time he saw something else.

ACROSS the room was a door leading to other compartments in the cellar. The whole basement—which was a very large one, extending outward to the rear of the house, beneath the yard area—was partitioned off into rooms and used by various members of the rebel fraternity as dormitories during their frequent visits. Standing in the doorway was a man who certainly had not been there when Mark had come in.

Vaguely he remembered seeing him before. That gaunt, dour visage and . . .

Abruptly he remembered. This was the man who had occupied the cell next to him, and who had argued with Murf about his chances of escape. Later, when the prison break had been staged, he had been freed with the rest.

"How long have you been there?" Mark asked.

"Since you started to talk," said the man.

Murf frowned and glowered at him. But Smid motioned him to a seat.

"Sandy," he introduced. "He's one of the riders. Good man, even if his ancestry

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is mostly Mic. Born here, though. I knew him as a child."

Mark nodded. "Is it a habit of yours to eavesdrop?" he asked.

"I wasn't eavesdropping," denied Sandy. "I heard you come in and I headed this way. Anything this Mic has a hand in, I like to know about. So I stood there and listened. You could have seen me sooner if you'd looked up."

Murf growled, but his eyes twinkled. "He's suspicious of his own shadow. Thinks he's being followed."

Sandy's eyes were fixed balefully on the redhead. "I heard what I expected to hear," he said.

Mark could see the hate smoldering between the two men. Sandy's was frank, as if he didn't care who knew about it, least of all Murf. Murf was calmly supercilious, confident that it couldn't hurt him.

"What did you expect to hear?" asked Mark.

"I expected to hear this Mic trying to veto any idea which might prevent his brother Mics from invading the country."

Smid was plainly uneasy. "Stop it," he said. "We have dispelled all doubt of Murf's allegiance. That has all been covered before and proven to be nothing but a lot of wild talk based on a shock of red hair. Let's have no more of it."

"I take more convincing than the rest of you," Sandy declared. "Smooth talk doesn't touch me. And right now I want to know something."

"What is it?" asked Mark, his eyes on Murf who was apparently completely at ease. A little chill coursed its way down Mark's spine. Murf seemed a little too much at ease considering he was being accused of the vilest treachery.

"I want to know what the twenty-first dispatch rider is for."

"The twenty . . ." Smid interruped himself to stare at Murf. "I thought there were only twenty needed."

Murf grinned. "There are," he replied. "Suppose you call in the man that bothers you, Sandy."

Sandy left the room with a scowl. In a minute he was back with a man dressed in his underwear, who seemed a bit put out about being awakened. He blinked his eyes and stared belligerently around the room.

"There are twenty of us," Sandy said. "And each man has his orders, covering every section of the duchy, three of them covering the other duchies. But there are twenty-one horses being kept in readiness down in the stable. I checked up and found that the odd horse had been assigned to this man. His name is Doog, another Mic! He won't tell us what his orders are. Very mysterious about it."

Mark looked at the man, who at that moment recognized him and saluted belatedly. "Repeat your orders," said Mark, returning the salute.

The man looked bewildered. "I can't," he said.

"Why can't you?"

"I don't have any."

Mark looked at Murf who was grinning maliciously toward Sandy.

"What's it all about?"

"VERY simple," Murf claimed. "I've got twenty men with orders who must mobilize all our forces when the word is given. It would be a shame to get anybody confused by changing the orders at the last minute. And that is what would happen if one of our men should get sick or be injured. His sector would have to be covered by some of the others. It would spoil the timing, too."

"And so this man is to be given the orders of the man who gets sick, if any," finished Mark. "Commendable foresight. Satisfied, Sandy?"

"No, and I never will be. How about the extra horse? Both a horse and a man won't get sick at the same time."

"No, you lunkhead," said Murf. "But if either one got sick it would cause a lot of trouble. So I have an extra one of each."

"Then why is this guy so mysterious? Pretending he has orders and won't tell the rest of us what they are."

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They all looked at the man, and he smirked self-consciously. "They all had their orders and I didn't. So I let on I did."

Mark laughed explosively. The others joined him, with the exception of Sandy. He glared at Murf, his suspicion not allayed in the least.

"You'll all realize I'm right, after it's too late," he growled.

With this dire prophecy he left the room, slamming the door after him. Mark chuckled and pretended not to see the glance which passed between Murf and the twenty-first rider.

"I bet he'll turn out to be a fighting fool when the time comes, suspicions or no suspicions," he said.

Murf nodded. "He's a fighter, all right," he admitted. "But he's annoying at times."

"Then everything's settled," Mark said. "I'll return to the prison and resume my work. The attack is postponed until we can install my machines. Understood?"

Murf nodded again.

Smid suddenly looked anxious. "But you're not going back to the prison? You'll have to perform in the arena again!"

"Safe as home in bed," said Mark, and they knew he wasn't boasting. "And it wouldn't serve any purpose to have all of Erlayok's men looking for me. As it is he knows where I am, without knowing what I'm doing. If I didn't go back, the first place he would look is here. He already suspects Murf, and knows I'm connected with him. Besides, all my equipment is at the jail, and it's too cumbercome to move without attracting attenion."

Mark sensed the next question before it came. "This equipment," queried Murf. "Where did you get it? And how can you work without the guards stopping you?"

"I told you that I used hypnotism to get out of there tonight. They leave me alone for the same reason. They fully believe that I am working on some machine which I shall use to entertain the crowd in the arena. As for the equipment, it consists of ordinary tools and hardware. Once I described it, they brought it to me."

Murf regarded him keenly. "This hypnotism," he said. "I've heard of it. Some kind of magic, isn't it? A powerful weapon for one who can use it?"

Smid was plainly awed. Mark, noticing his interest, coupled with Murf's question, was struck with a bright idea.

"Yes," he admitted. "Powerful in its way. Would you like to see it work?"

Without waiting for an answer Mark fixed his eyes on the twenty-first rider, and exerted his will. The man's face showed that he was instantly under control.

"YOU are familiar," said Mark, calmly, "with the type of faithful dog who worshipfully follows his master wherever he goes. Suppose you, as a man, had that same regard for me, your master. In fact you *have* such an affection, haven't you?"

As he said this Mark rose and walked across the room. The man got up and followed, docilely.

"That's a good boy," said Mark, and then leaned over and whispered to Murf: "Try to stop him!"

Murf looked startled and then did as he was asked. As Mark walked past him, followed by the hypnotized man, he suddenly stepped between them and spoke sharply to Doog. But Doog merely stepped around him and continued following Mark. Murf grabbed his arm and tried to stop him. Doog snarled and slapped the hand away. Murf stepped back, alarm showing in his eyes.

Mark smiled and sat down. "Sit over there," he directed Doog, and turned to the others. "The show's over. Simple, isn't it?"

Doog was still in the hypnotic trance, though Murf and Smid didn't know it. They supposed that Mark's "show's over" had released him. Mark meant them to think that way. Murf seemed to be shaken by the exhibition.

He had never thought that one man could possibly exert such power over the will of another. The fact frightened him, hard-headed as he was. Smid was frankly

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admiring. In the course of their association Mark had astounded him time after time. His diversified talents had impressed Smid as much as his zeal as a patriot.

"The night must be drawing to an end," Mark hazarded. "I'd better be getting back to the prison. Suppose you two lead the way to the door. It's not safe to show a light upstairs and you know the way better than I."

Smid obligingly led the way, followed by Murf. Neither saw Doog obediently rise and walk after Mark. At the front door Smid peered out and scanned the street.

"Night-watch is elsewhere," he said.

"Okay," answered Mark. "I'll see you gentlemen after the games are over. I'll have the machines by then. Right now I'm going to run for a few blocks. If I'm seen on the streets, I don't want it to happen around here."

Murf nodded and Smid stepped aside. Mark suddenly darted out the door and ran down the street. He heard a slight commotion behind him but didn't turn his head. He knew that Doog in his haste to follow had bowled over the other two men. Mark didn't stop until he was around a corner two blocks away. Doog panted to his side.

A quick glance around the corner told him that Murf hadn't started to follow as yet.

"Doog!" he said. "What were Murf's orders?"

"Ride direct to Govern and inform him of rebellion."

"New orders," Mark snapped. "Remember this when you ride through York—remember at York—that you are to turn back and lend a hand to the first revolutionists you see fighting."

When Murf arrived at the corner he found Mark gravely passing his hands across Doog's face. He stopped and watched the mysterious process. Finally Mark gave a quick flourish and snapped his fingers. His lips were moving as he did this, no doubt mouthing some obscure incantations, Murf thought. With the snap, Doog's expression changed and he looked about him in bewilderment. Mark sighed in apparent relief.

"He was a tough customer," he breathed. "Thought he would never come out of it. Now you two get back under cover before somebody sees you."

CHAPTER XIX

BROTHER CAT

MARK didn't immediately renew his attack on the problem when he returned to the prison. His mind was too filled with anger at Murf. Still he couldn't quite believe that the redhead was really a traitor. Yet could he doubt it? Govern was the commander-in-chief of the Mic forces and there could be only one reason for notifying him of the rebellion among the Brish. And that was to give the Mics an opportunity to stage an attack.

Mark realized that he should have suspected something long ago. Mic's frequent reference to the inhabitants of Scarbor, in which he labeled them a scary bunch, among other things, should have warned him weeks before. But the redhead's obvious sympathy for the down-trodden people, and his plans to relieve them of oppression, had stilled any vagrant suspicions before they had taken form. Mark shook his head and almost wished he hadn't discovered Murf's perfidy.

For Murf, whatever else he might be, he proved himself a friend.

Mark couldn't forget that. He was thinking of it, in fact, as he decided to defer any disposition he might make of Murf. There was nothing the man could do to harm the Brish, or interfere with his plans, now that Doog had been taken care of. And Doog wouldn't even know that his orders had been tampered with until he passed through the city of York.

And then the effect of Mark's post-hypnotic suggestion would drive him to aid the rebels. But there was no use in thinking further about the matter, for he didn't intend to give the word which would start the rebellion for some time.

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And in the meantime . . .

Mark looked at his jumbled mass of apparatus, feeling suddenly disgusted with the whole setup. His efforts seemed to be frustrated at every turn. He continued to gaze at the diversified electrical equipment, and tried to concentrate on the problem of artificially creating the hypnosis wave. And at the same time trying to keep his mind from returning to the methods he knew were useless. It was while engaged in trying to think up a new approach that the sound of the morning gong beat in upon his consciousness.

And with the sound came a return of the idea which had been driven from his mind on the day previous.

Cursing softly at his own stupidity, his face revealed his glee as he viciously kicked all of the apparatus into a broken heap. The twinges of pain he experienced each time his sandaled toe came in contact with something heavy, seemed to stimulate his thought toward its logical conclusion.

The equipment, he knew, would be of no further use to him. The civilization which had designed it originally had not been far enough advanced to uncover the knowledge needed to create the short waves of thought by machinery. The apparatus of that civilization was too primitive!

On the face of it, this conclusion seemed more discouraging than otherwise. For it followed that Mark's knowledge of short-wave phenomena was of necessity insufficient to accomplish his purpose. But instead of feeling depressed, Mark was elated. For he knew now how he could obtain the necessary machines!

Omega had told him of a race of people on another planet that had managed to devise compact machines which controlled the sub-atomic energies which pervade all space. These machines manufactured the telekinetic wave, a second-cousin to the hypnosis wave. Omega had also said that when Mark had succeeded in making a machine to produce the hypnosis wave, he would be able to make adjustments on the same machine so that it would furnish its own power by means of the telekinesis wave. They were so near in frequency it was the same as producing two notes on a violin.

Therefore it would work both ways! Omega could copy the design of the telekinesis machine and he would do the rest. He should have thought of it long ago.

Perhaps the fact that Omega had said that this other race had no more intelligence than he, had made him go ahead with attempting to duplicate the feat without thinking that he might borrow the idea. But he realized, when he remembered that the device had been compact, that the knowledge of the race must have been superior to his own. Any apparatus of his that would come anywhere near the shortness of thought waves, would be decidedly bulky. Therefore, the methods of the other people were far more advanced.

He had forgotten, at the time that Omega had told the story, that intelligence and knowledge were two different things. Intelligence is the ability to solve new problems. And after all, Omega had only said that it lay within the mechanical genius of man to produce the waves. He hadn't said that Mark himself possessed sufficient knowledge.

THE only thing necessary was to contact Omega. Mark groaned. He didn't know how to! Always in the past, Omega had come and gone of his own accord. He had never told Mark how he might be summoned in an emergency, though frequently he had opportunely appeared at such moments.

Casting back in his memory, he tried to think if he had at any time sent out an unconscious mental call for his benefactor? Thinking it over, he decided he hadn't.

But Mark was now in a state of mind where any straw was a redwood. He had to contact Omega and get the necessary information before it was too late. And if thinking about him might attract his attention, it wouldn't hurt to try it. He set about the task, concentrating on his ubiquitous friend to the exclusion of all else.

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He became so absorbed in this pursuit that he only allowed a small portion of his mind to notice and respond when Spud appeared with the manacles. Without speaking he allowed him to fasten them, and followed him into the guard room. He was still concentrating mightily when Chumly and Erlayok's man came to escort him to the arena for the third day's games. Both noticed his preoccupation, but forebore to intrude upon it. Chumly, out of courtesy, and Erlayok's man as a matter of policy.

But once within the prisoners' room under the stands, he was forced to give up his mental exercise. Several of the men who had survived the preceding days of performing, gathered around him as soon as he arrived. One of them, it seemed, had some news to impart. One of the guards was an obscure relative of his and had told him what he had learned of the program of today's games. And Mark, he had learned, was to head the day's bill by entering the arena to do battle with three lions!

Mark didn't feel any too optimistic about the prospect, even when told that he would be allowed to use his axe. Erlayok certainly was leaving no stone unturned to give him the works. The Earl had no doubt decided that it would be useless to try to force any information from him, and was therefore trying to get him killed. And if he should survive these games, Mark thought, Erlayok would probably do his utmost to have him assassinated. *If* he survived the games . . .

There was a certain amount of comfort in the thought of the axe. It might give him a chance. Erlayok had very likely allowed its use only because to give him a lesser weapon would have been obvious murder. And Mark had become popular with the spectators in the past two days. Although they were anxious to see him perform, the Earl nevertheless was obliged to extend him a fighting chance, however slim. The crowd would not have stood for less. And Mark began to formulate a plan to use that fighting chance.

It was likely that the beasts would be loosed one by one. Mark had learned that the lions were kept in individual cages, and that the system for releasing them was to roll the cage to the door opening on the pit, then to lift the cage door.

When the lion came out of the cage it had to walk directly into the arena, and the iron doors were slammed behind it. And inasmuch as the door was only wide enough to permit one cage to be rolled against it at a time, Mark was becoming hopeful as to the outcome of the battle.

His plan was simple. As each lion was released he would attack it and try to dispatch it before another could be loosed. If only they didn't turn all three lions out, and then send him last!

BUT nothing of the sort happened. Mark was given his axe and the barred door to the arena was held open. He stepped immediately to the door behind which the animals were kept. Even if he hadn't known which one it was, his nose would have told him. The booming sounds of the announcer's voice mingled with the snarls of the beasts within.

A cage was being wheeled toward the door. Mark felt an inward qualm as he faced the animal through the bars.

This lion was massive, black-maned, and apparently not as well starved as the one he had battled before. But that fact gave him no satisfaction whatever.

This beast looked far more formidable, and every bit as ferocious.

The iron-barred door was swung inward, and the cage rolled against the opening. Mark gripped his axe tightly as a man climbed to the top of the cage. As the door rattled from his fumblings with the catch, the king of beasts crouched and fixed his eyes balefully on Mark. He appeared to know just what was going on. And the crouch indicated that he intended to spring as soon as the door was lifted.

Mark, knowing that the weight of the animal would bowl him over, stepped aside and prepared to get in an axe-cut as he flashed past.

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The cage-door lifted, and Mark swung savagely. The axe bit deeply into the shoulder of the lion as he sprang forth with a tremendous leap. But surprisingly the lion paid no heed. Mark had expected, little though he knew of the habits of lions, that the beast would wheel and return the attack ferociously. But it didn't. It simply let the rules go hang.

When the leap ended the beast continued its progress toward the center of the pit, running proudly, its head carried high. Mark, frantic at the lost seconds, sprang in pursuit. If he didn't catch and vanquish this animal instantly, he would have to face three of them.

He caught it, all right, but as he aimed a crippling blow at the animal's spine, it suddenly wheeled and crouched. But it didn't crouch as the other lion had. This might be considered half a crouch. The fore-quarters went down, but the rear remained up, the tail waving on high.

That way the beast looked—well, actually friendly. Like a household pet. And the idea of a lion romping about the house—anybody's house—was definitely disconcerting. It didn't make sense.

Mark stopped his axe blow and hesitated, confused. The unorthodox behavior of the animal stunned him for a moment. But he was too intent on the work to be done to hesitate long.

He aimed a terrific blow at the beast's head, hoping to cleave the skull. But the lion dodged and jumped aside like a playful kitten. It then took up its ridiculous stance in a new spot, meanwhile turning loose a half-hearted roar, reproachful in tone.

It was like a magnified meow from a loyal but much-put-upon tabby. Even the face looked hurt and reproachful—which is an interesting way for any lion's face to be.

But Mark was too busy to notice any of this. All he knew was that he had missed. The axe had buried itself in the ground.

Savagely he wrenched it loose and aimed another cut. The lion repeated its antic. This time Mark saw the silliness of the beast's maneuver, and pulled the axe from the dirt slowly.

He now had a definite feeling that this encounter was entering a new phase: a phase in which he would find the axe of no value whatever. And he was quite right.

The expression on the lion's face distinctly said "Hiya, sucker." It came happily over to lick at Mark's hand. Mark, his eyes glinting, kicked the lion square in the stomach. Tears welled from its eyes as it sat back on its haunches and raised a paw to its belly. "Now is that nice?" Mark swore later he heard a voice say.

The crowd roared its approval. The lion eyed them thoughtfully. Mark sneaked up and cuffed its moth-eaten ears.

"I hope you're feeling this," chortled Mark, giving a final cuff. "If you're going to be a lion, you might try to be a good one. Come on, let's show these yokels a good fight."

"You asked for it, pal," said the lion in the voice of Omega, eyeing the two beasts which had just entered the pit. He gave a tremendous roar and started toward them, Mark at his side. The two newcomers saw the impending attack and crouched, waiting to spring.

But both Mark and Omega executed the move which would nullify the advantage of the springing attack. As if they had done this thing often, they veered away from each other and came toward the two lions from an angle. The lions sprang just the same, but the effectiveness of the leaps was gone.

CHAPTER XX

HASTY REBEL

MARK dodged the raking claws of his adversary, and dealt a blow which ended his half of the performance. His axe caught the beast in the center of the backbone, severing it. The lion thudded to the ground, thrashed for a moment and was still.

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But Omega was giving the crowd its money's worth. These people had never seen a battle between two lions before.

Omega bit and he clawed. He also snarled, between bites. All in all it was a sight worth seeing, and everybody present, including Mark, was enjoying it.

The battle was foreordained to go the way it did. Omega, the larger lion, won. After about five minutes of swift and savage conflict, during which the ground became splattered with gore, the smaller beast gave up the ghost. The black-maned survivor gave a mighty roar and stepped mincingly toward Mark.

"Pretty good for the mangy shape I'm in," he said. "What did you want to see me about?"

The crowd was watching them curiously, fascinated by what appeared to be a completely novel relationship between lion and man. The situation was, for the moment, just a little bit embarrassing.

"Walk on your hind legs, or something," Mark suggested. "I can't take a lion back into the prisoners' room with me. You'd scare people. And I've some things to talk about. Do some tricks here, while I talk to you."

"Just a few simple tricks, I suppose," the lion said scathingly. "Like sawing a nitwit in half."

"Call your own shots, but get busy."

Omega obligingly treated the crowd to a series of antics which no self-respecting lion would have done, while Mark explained his inabilty to manufacture the hypnosis wave.

"I thought you were a bit over-confident," Omega remarked, between nipups. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Keep moving," Mark told him. "Make it faster and funnier; give 'em their money's worth. What're we here for?"

Omega reared on his hind legs and went into a bowdlerized hula, and Mark explained that he could use the plans of the machine already developed by the race of beings of which Omega had spoken. At this point the lion dropped to all fours and snarled menacingly. The stands suddenly shouted in unison. It appeared that the beast had suddenly decided to turn savage, and refuse to obey further the commands of his conqueror.

Even Mark, surprised by the change, went instinctively on his guard for a second—then grinned. "Give," he said.

"Didn't I tell you those people were destroyed when their sun exploded?" the lion growled.

"Sure, sure," answered Mark aiming a kick at the beast's nose. "What of it? It happened during your lifetime. So you can travel back and take a look at the machines for me."

The lion crouched, dodging the kick. Then he leaped on Mark, bearing him to the ground. They tussled, rolled back and forth in mock combat. Omega growled and snarled his reply. "Ungrateful whelp! You know what trouble I've had with time. It isn't fair to ask! I won't do it!"

"You've got to," Mark told him. "You got me into all this. You should have known that I don't have enough knowledge to invent the necessary machinery. You certainly knew that the race you spoke of was further advanced than my own. And yet you encouraged me. Told me to go ahead. Now I've wasted half the week, and the rebellion might fail due to the delay. It's your moral obligation to provide these machines."

The lion sat back on his haunches and panted dejectedly. "How could I know you would fall down on the job?" he wailed. "You were so cocky about it."

"You should have known," said Mark uncompromisingly.

"Why should I? I don't know anything about machinery. All I've ever done is copy things already invented. I've got no use for it myself."

"But you realize your responsibility, don't you? Think of the endless wars which the machines will prevent. You've always said you're against wars. Here's your chance to do something about it."

"I know," Omega admitted. "I might have known I'd have no peace of mind once I dabbled in human affairs. It's easy

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to start, but then you can't stop. All right, I'll do it. So long!"

Mark grinned. "Phooey!" he said. "You're enjoying yourself."

THEN abruptly he realized that Omega had already left. The lion remained, to be sure, but then Omega had only usurped the body of a lion already in existence. He hadn't created this beast. Mark had been fooled, expecting the lion to vanish when Omega left. He realized his mistake when the beast suddenly crouched and prepared to leap.

Frantically Mark snatched out his axe.

The crowd came to its feet and roared as the lion unleashed the spring-steel muscles in its long body. Mark dodged sideways and lashed out with the axe. It landed, but not fatally.

The lion wheeled and returned to the attack. Its mouth was open, revealing sharp, yellow fangs. There followed a series of rushes, Mark dodging agilely and getting in a number of axe-cuts. Once he slipped in a puddle of gore, and almost went down. That time he only escaped the slashing talons by a hair's-breadth.

After a few minutes of this game of cat and mouse, the lion showed signs of tiring. It had lost quite a bit of blood, and its rushes weren't as swift as at first. Mark noticed this and set himself for the kill.

Remembering the ease with which one blow had dispatched the other lion, he waited for the beast to make another attack. Then he dodged aside and brought the axe down in the center of the animal's spine.

The battle ended.

BACK in the room with the other prisoners Mark listened, embarrassed, to the praise which invariably came after one of his performances. This time even the guards were voluble.

One of them suggested that, inasmuch as it was certain he would survive the games, he should join up with the army of his master, one of the lesser nobles. The idea immediately took hold. There were members of several of these forces, and they all presented arguments why he should associate himself with them. Among the guards were a few of Erlayok's men. They kept a strict silence, knowing the Earl's enmity for Mark.

But to all this, the prisoners had only amused smiles. Mark was aware that they, to a man, knew that he was the rebel leader, and would have nothing to do with the armies of the nobles. Several, in fact, were members of his own gang of patriots, condemned to the games for that and other reasons.

Some of these had been subjected to torture, and bore the scars, but none of them had revealed any but the vaguest information. They had been sentenced to the games because they had convinced their captors that they knew nothing of value.

An unexpected commotion at the street entrance put a stop to all discussion.

A man, it seemed, was trying to get in. The guards at the gate were pushing him away, probably thinking him demented, but each time he insisted on coming back.

He succeeded in gaining admittance finally, when he reached through the bars and tweaked the nose of one of Erlayok's men. The one, in fact, who was assigned to keep a watch on Mark, and who didn't like the job a bit. He opened the gate and yanked the offender inside.

Then he knocked him to the floor with his fist.

Mark looked at the wizened figure of the man and gave a start. It was Smid, but an almost unrecognizable Smid. He was covered with dried blood from a wound on the scalp, and his hands, clothes and face were caked with filth. Seeing Mark, he scurried over to him.

The guards laughed and made no move to interfere. It struck them funny that anyone would try to break into such a place.

"He's done it!" Smid gasped, almost falling again.

Mark reached out a hand and steadied him. "Calm yourself," he said. "Who did what?"

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"Murf!" said Smid. "He sent off the dispatch riders!"

Mark's eyes narrowed. "You mean with the mobilization orders? Or the new orders?"

Smid shook his head impatiently; grabbed Mark's arm and talked fast.

"The original orders. Our men to converge within the city inside of an hour! He fought a duel with Sandy after you left, and killed him. The riders knew nothing of the new orders from you, and Murf killed Sandy before he could tell them. When I tried to stop him, he hit me over the head and left me for dead."

Mark felt his plans crashing about his ears. The premature attack might well ruin everything. Doog, of course, would never deliver his message to Govern, but that made little difference, now.

The big thing was to see that the initial steps in the rebellion were carried through, now that it was started.

If the Mics saw their opportunity and crossed the border while the Brish were at odds, there would be a better chance to repel them if he had the reigns firmly in his hands, here in Scarbor. If only this could have been delayed until Omega returned with the machines . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

An Eye Watching Death

A NEW instrument for cheating death —for spotting its approach in time to head it off—has been made available to medical science. It's an electric eye, whose warning is registered and can be read instantly.

The device makes use of a well-known phenomenon—the darkening of the blood when oxygen becomes insufficient. With diminution of oxygen, of course, life is on its way out; hence the ability to check on this condition may mean the opportunity of a saving a patient.

During surgical operations, for example, there is frequently a certain loss of oxygen as a result of the anaesthetic and of the operation itself. This loss manifests itself in unnatural pallor of the face; and the anaesthetist is constantly on guard, ready to administer more oxygen when this pallor appears.

But the sign may not come quickly enough, in critical periods when the difference between life and death may be measured in split seconds. And it is in just such an emergency that the new electric eye may prove itself most useful.

What we have here is a highly sensitive photo-electric cell which is adjusted to show the minutest changes in the color of the blood below the skin. Essentially, its operation is based on the simple principle that a strong light held against the hand will make that hand semi-transparent.

Thus in Detroit experiments on animals, a strong light was held behind the animal's ear, making the blood beneath the skin visible. The sensitive photo-electric cell, applied to this principle, makes any change in the color of the blood instantly apparent.

Naturally, it seems to follow that the use of this device in human surgery should eliminate the hazardous time factor in following the patient's condition. Instead of watching the face for increasing pallor, the anaesthetist may know at once the condition of the blood and the necessity for more oxygen, as soon as it arises.

This specialized photo-electric cell was described before the clinical congress of the American College of Surgeons last fall by Dr. Roy D. McClure, of the Ford Hospital, Detroit. Though the technique had until then been tried only on animals, the results were sufficiently encouraging to hold promise of an early application to human beings.

Dr. Charles Ticknor Tolson

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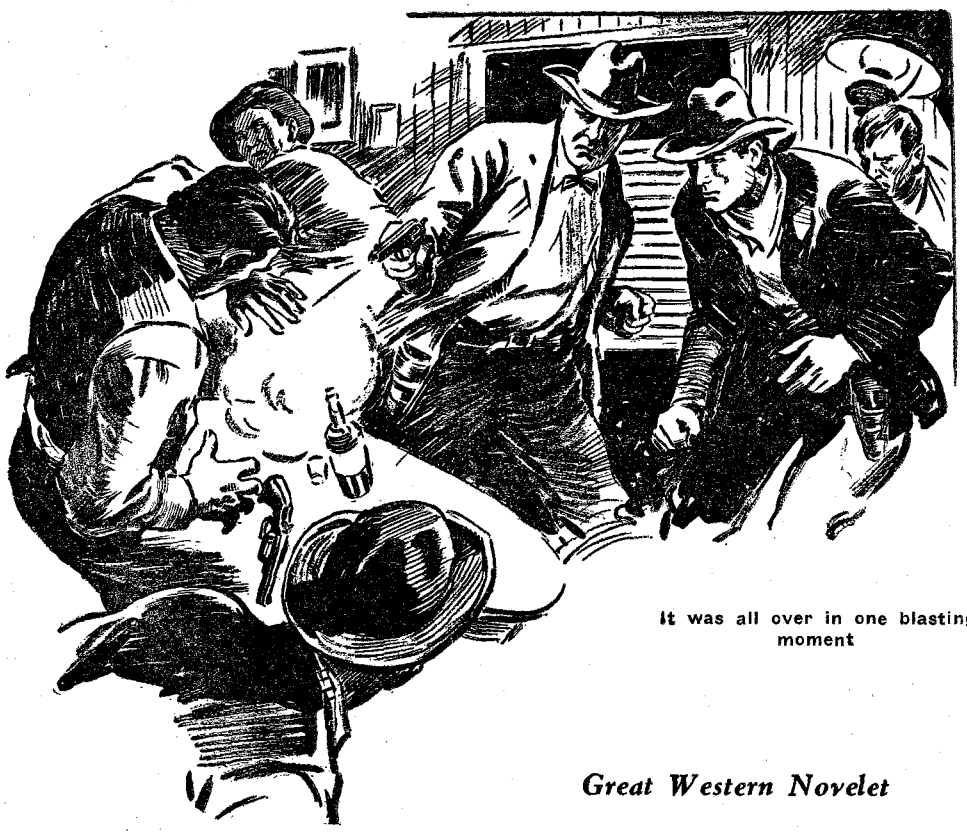

It was all over in one blasting moment

Great Western Novelet

Uneasy Gun

All the Mattys were killers; gun magic was bred in their blood and bones. And no matter how hard Old Cy tried, he couldn't turn young Elk Matty, last of the breed, into a peace-loving citizen

By C. K. SHAW

Author of "Wagon Whelp," "Stagecoach Johnny," etc.

I

TO Elk Matty a promise was binding; and when it was given to his mother it held with bands of steel. But fulfilling this promise was the hardest thing he had ever done. To face old Cy Bisby, to crawl to him, you might say, on his knees—why, Elk'd a thousand times rather take the worst kind of gun-whipping.

The Mattys were not bred for begging favors. The corpse-making Mattys they were called, and Elk bore the stamp of his race burned into bone and sinew, printed clear in the commanding eyes.

He was no more a killer than his father before him, but he was a Matty.

The hand of the Creator had not been

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hesitant when his lean face was cast. A few bold, sharply cut lines, a jaw that could freeze without jutting. A smooth, level mask of a face, that had a taut and dangerous look. Elk was just twenty, but already men gave him elbow room when trouble threatened to break. They had seen his dad whip into action and they knew the magic speed of the Mattys was bred into their fiber and blood.

Elk wiped the sweat from his brow as he jogged toward Lewiston and Cy Bisby. "Red River" Parks jogged beside Elk, his careful eyes squinted to shrewd dots. All day he had ridden quietly, waiting for the kid to speak out, but it was evening now and the pale, tormented lips were still tightly gripped. By that Red River knew how deep was Matty's trouble. Elk had always been free and easy with Red River.

Red River cleared his throat of the dust. "Aimin' to take in the town or be took in?" he asked.

Elk never turned. "Just aiming to look around." The words were so many stones in a wall.

Red River straightened from his slump, the leather of his fighting harness creaking softly. "If I hadn't trotted you on my knee when you wasn't bigger'n a pint of whisky, I'd think you was tryin' to freeze me out. I'd think you'd framed a play that shut ol' Red River on the outside."

Elk's eyes held to the road. "I'm riding a lone trail, Red River. That's why I didn't let you know I was coming."

The older man nodded. "I figured you'd gone off in a yank and expecetd me to follow. Is there anything like—well say, a gun fracas apt to happen in Lewiston?"

"Nope. I'm getting a job tending mules."

SURPRISE washed away the words Red River had planned. "Tendin' mules is nice work," he said. "Ain't never took it up myself, but still I got nothin' agin' it. We'll keep each other in sight in Lewiston."

Elk Matty continued to gaze straight out between his horse's ears, his face an ivory-smooth mask. The words that had been intended to cheer, chilled him. Red River Parks was known on many an outlaw trail, and had seen the inside of sundry jails. There was certain to be some eye in Lewiston to spot the old rawhide gunman, and then Cy Bisby would hear of him and recall that Red River Parks was the partner of Ebon Matty, Elk's dad. From that Cy would guess that Elk was his nephew, the son of Cy's sister, Mary.

Elk knew he dared not be seen in Lewiston in the company of Red River, not if he were to do the work his mother had given him. And he was going to do it, for he had given his promise.

Red River was studying him. "You're a fine kid, Elk," he said. "You don't drink er gamble er raise hell noways that somebody else don't start. Your dad said when he was passin', that he hoped you'd keep out of bad trouble fer yer ma's sake, and you always have."

"Because you always got me by the back of the neck and seat of the pants and lifted me out before I got warmed up. You've kept to my trail steady, Red River. My dad couldn't have done a better job than you have."

"He wanted you to be a good kid, Elk, counta your ma. She was different than your pa. I don't know nothin' about her folks, 'cept that they was different. Your ma had a brother that hated Ebon Matty, and he never would see his sister after she married Eb. There was no call for that stiffneck attytude, 'cause your ma always had plenty and never saw abuse. But her brother thought Eb Matty was lower than a snake!"

ELK looked down the Clearwater canyon; the town of Lewiston could be seen ahead. Soon the hubbub would be around his ears. He knew he must never tell Red River that he was going crawling to this stiffnecked brother of his mother's; Red River was too loyal to Ebon Matty.

He could never make Red River understand that faraway light that had been in his mother's eyes as she died. It had been

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a light that belonged to another world, a still-burning, God-fearing, flame.

Her thin hands had clasped his and her voice had come back in low strength. "Promise me, Elkanah. Promise me you won't fail."

He promised her. . . .

"If you were changing your name," Elk asked, "what would you consider a good one?"

Red River pulled to a walk so they would not reach the town too soon. "I was Dead-spot Mike in that Peaked River country, and then I've used the names of Sam Walker and Bill Dodson and—"

"Would Smith do?"

"Too common, they'd figure it wasn't real. Charley Jones'd do."

"I'll be Charley Jones in Lewiston."

"I'll bear that in mind. We'll stick together and—"

"I'm playing a lone hand." Elk's face froze with the words.

"We might kinda talk things over," the older man said.

"Not this time, Red River."

Pain touched the weathered countenance for a second, then all expression vanished. Red River Parks had been considered as dangerous a man in his way as Ebon Matty. He was still dangerous. The rock-ribbed body threw out a threat, and the gun strapped to the waist backed it up. "As you say, Elk," he said. "You're equal to makin' your decisions. You're a man now and a good one."

"He thinks I'm outgrowing him," Elk thought. "He thinks the smart kid is cutting loose from the old man." Elk's hand gripped the reins and he lifted his horse for a lope.

Red River pulled in behind him to a dim trail leading to the east end of town. "I planned goin' in this way," he said, and trotted off.

Elk watched him go. The voice had been casual. If Red River had just turned in and cussed him like he did some times for being a brainless kid too smart for his hide, he'd have known that things were still all right between them.

But he was riding away as though it were nothing unusual for them to travel different paths in a strange town. Elk felt a gripping in his throat.

He spurred to a gallop, but his throat wouldn't let loose. Since he had walked beside Red River Parks, hanging on to his pistol to keep pace, they had never parted like this.

II

ELK stabled his horse and went to the mule sheds belonging to Cy Bisby. They were seething with activity. A packtrain was due to leave the next morning for a boom-camp six days deep in the mountains.

A young, snappy-eyed man wearing a pistol and knife was directing things. He flashed from spot to spot, missing nothing. He finished inspecting a pack-saddle and whirled on Elk.

"Well?"

"I want to see Cy Bisby."

"If it's about a job, see me. I'm Paul Drexel." His voice snapped against the wall and his black eyes stabbed.

"It's about a job."

"We don't need men."

"Not even for board?"

Drexel's lids slid down. "A man that offers to work for his board usually isn't worth that much. The river boats are needing men to rustle freight, see them."

Elk felt hot under the black eyes. They were standing beside an opening into a shadowy supply room. A form suddenly filled the doorway. A big roughly-cast, square-faced man stepped out and with him a tall girl dressed in soft shirt and buckskin skirt. They had heard the conversation and Elk felt the hot blod climbing higher. Mattys usually demanded and got; here he had been turned down offering his services for nothing.

The old man stepped out to survey Elk, his eyes shadowed by wiry white brows, his big mouth a firm line. The eyes burning in the square face were familiar to Elk, they were his mother's.

He did not need to be told this was Cy

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Bisby, the brother that had raised Elk's mother when their parents died. This was the brother that had sacrificed his young manhood for his baby sister. He had scrimped that she might have better clothes, he had foregone personal pleasures that she might go to good schools.

Then she had run away and married a Matty.

The book had closed for twenty years. Elk was here to reopen it. He had promised his mother to make up to this old man for the sister that had gone out of his life; he had promised her not to fail. As he stood before Cy Bisby, he thought of a sheer wall, and of what small chance there was of climbing it with only his bare hands. Here was the man who had cursed every Matty that had ever been born.

Cy Bisby's glance traveled over Elk. "Have I ever seen you before?" he asked with a frown.

"No sir."

Elk knew if Cy Bisby should piece together the haunting bits that were reminding him of one of the corpse-making Mattys, his wrath would explode. And it was a wrath that could shake mountains. Hard stubborness was stamped on his face, squared into his shoulders, molded into his blocky hands. But there was also about him an indestructible honesty.

"How come you're offering to work for your board?" Cy Bisby asked.

"Because I am not an experienced packer."

"Want to be a packer, eh? Why?"

"I want to learn the business." Elk kept his tones smooth—too smooth, he realized, when he saw Drexel's black eyes narrow.

"A man that offers to work for his beans isn't worth the powder and lead to blow him up," Drexel snapped.

Cy Bisby was used to making his own decisions. "Can you use that gun?" he asked.

Elk's hand dropped to the worn butt. His naturalness brought a shadowy smile to Drexel's lips. "I can," he answered.

"We've had two trains robbed lately," Cy Bisby said. "All our packers are going armed." He turned to Drexel. "Better find a place for this man, Paul."

Drexel shrugged. "He might be useful," he said. And to Elk: "Be here at three in the morning. What name?"

"Charley Jones."

Cy Bisby shook his head. "Even your voice devils me," he said frowning.

Elk spoke quietly. "I have never met you before, Mr. Bisby."

For a second Elk's eyes met the tall girl's and his memory turned back to a mountainside of blue larkspur. Her movements were free as the giving of a young tree to the breeze. He thought she smiled faintly, but it might have been the habitual tilt of her lips.

Elk walked away scorning the lie he had told. But there had been no other way. The name of Matty would have touched off a blast. Later he would find a way; he had to find a way.

THAT evening Elk walked into the Muleshoe Gambling House and Saloon. He hoped to hear more about the thieves that had been looting the rich pack-trains. He saw a man sitting at one of the center tables, drinking occasionally, watching the room from expectant eyes. This man was ready to take on trouble going or coming; Elk read him and kept clear of the table.

Elk's breath drew shallow when he saw Red River enter the saloon, take two swift drinks, then sink into an empty chair at a poker table. If he saw Elk, he gave no sign. He stacked some gold before him and hitched his gun to ease.

Elk wished he could tell him about Cy Bisby, but he couldn't. Red River would never understand why a Matty should beg for favor. He would say the promise should not be kept because it should never have been asked. He would say Cy Bisby started it all by cursing a Matty for marrying a Bisby.

Elk had a very small feeling, buried deeply under the things he actually knew, that helped him to understand Cy Bisby. The substantial appearance of Bisby had helped him also; the sleek mules and the

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loaded packs. Here was something upon which you might fasten your hands, solid things that typified the man himself. The life of Ebon Matty was a dim trail ribboning into the sunset.

Elk couldn't put it into strong enough words to convince Red River Parks, but dimly he understood. Terribly as he hated the work his mother had given him, he did not believe she had been unfair in demanding it.

Elk was jerked from his thoughts, meeting the eyes of the man he had noticed sitting at the table. They were bright like a cold day. The right hand was within an inch of his gun, and in the top of his boot was thrust a knife.

Three drunks came from the gambling room and swerved into Elk. They hit him heavily and he put out his hand to the gunman's table for support. The flimsy thing rocked and a bottle at the man's elbow crashed to the floor. The fellow sprang up, shoulders hunched, eyes blasting a challenge.

"Blunderin' jackass!" he said in a tight voice.

A giant hand seemed to split the crowd and sweep it to the walls. Even the three drunks melted away. Elk and the man at the table were standing alone. Lewiston minded its own business when armed men came to grips.

"Cough up twenty bucks fer that whisky, kid," ordered the man, his voice heating. "Cough it up 'fore I let a bullet through you!"

Elk saw the man's fingers tense toward his gun, and his blood leaped in a responsive wave.

His slim, lightning hands froze for action. He was suddenly as ready as if he had been waiting for a thousand years. The Mattys fought that way, without a breath of preparation.

Then Elk's heart contracted and his thoughts banked into a wall. He had come to Lewiston to prove to Cy Bisby that a Matty could do more than fight.

"I'll buy you another bottle of whisky," he said.

"Cough up them twenty bucks, I'll buy it."

Elk glanced at the small stain of liquid on the floor. The bottle had been nearly empty and perhaps cheap stuff. "I'll give you ten dollars," he said quietly. "That will more than settle the bill."

The gunman seemed pleased that Elk was showing such poor judgment as to anger him further. He wanted trouble. He wanted to turn loose that gun at his thigh.

Then Elk was aware of three men shifting to vantage points; the gunman beside the table met their glances swiftly. There appeared to be a prearrangement to the play. Elk thought fast. He had a lot of money on him; maybe they were interested in that. He had ridden in on a good horse. Prosperous strangers in a wide-open town were always fair game for gun-slicks.

He began carefully reaching into his pocket for the twenty dollars. He would check these fellows later; now he must sidestep gunplay.

The poker game in the corner was suddenly shy one player, and Elk saw Red River Parks easing into the picture. The icy eyes were cutting from the time-hardened face. Elk knew he must move swiftly if he were to keep things peaceful. Red River wouldn't count the odds, he'd just roar in, expecting Elk Matty to furnish his part of the smoke.

Elk drew the gold piece from his pocket and sent it rolling across the table. He caught the stiffening of Red River's body. The room drew a long breath, then it snickered. That snicker was like an icicle drawn down Elk's spine.

The gunman looked at the gold piece scornfully. He had been watching his enemy warily, now his lips curled loosely. His hand shot out and his palm cracked against the face of Elk Matty.

"Watch that you don't give me no more trouble, kid," he commanded. "Git off the sidewalk when you see me comin.'"

Elk weaved back under the slap. His heart was pumping fighting blood through his veins, but his mind was telling his hand to stay away from that gun. Only a second

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did he hesitate, but in that instant Red River Parks leaped in.

"Better reach, rattler," Red River barked. "I'm drawin'—"

The roar of guns killed the last of the words. Two crashes shook the room, and both men lurched under the impact of lead. The gunman folded up, slipping along the table to the floor. Red River was weaving back to steadiness. Then the guns of the other three opened up.

Red River Parks was caught in a three-cornered battle. He made no move for shelter, but took these fresh enemies in a blazing stand.

Elk's mind sheeted with the white flame that had touched the minds of the Mattys for generations. His hands dropped and flame spit from two guns with the movement. Lead spewed forth with a rapidness never seen before in Lewiston. Two men went down, then the third.

Elk stood, lean body bent over his pistols. "That all that wants to horn in?"

"That's all, Jones," said a quiet voice.

III

ELK knew it was Paul Drexel before he turned. Drexel came forward, examined the fallen men. Two were dead. He waved toward the other pair.

"Carry them to the doc. Call the sheriff."

Cy Bisby was beside Drexel, his face more squarish and solid, his mouth a tighter line. He stood on spread feet, hands in pocket, looking Elk over inch by inch. When the sheriff came, Bisby was the first man questioned.

Cy Bisby's grim lips split to grudging words. "The kid here is a gunman straight from Hell, but he offered to pay for the whisky. He was forced to this fight."

The crowd agreed. The sheriff had himself a stiff drink and called it self-defense. Red River thanked him and turned to leave the saloon. A voice boomed out to halt him.

"Red River Parks, you ol' coyote! What you doin' in Idyhoe?"

"Howdy, Bill," was all Red River answered, and kept going, not hurrying.

"Wait a bit, ain't seen you since that scrap you and Ebon Matty had ten years ago at Sulphur Springs." The man stepped out and looked at Elk. "Hell's-fire and brimstone, this is Eb's son, ain't it? I recollected somethin' familiar about him when he went into his gun dance. He lays them out just like all the corpse-makin' Mattys."

The name of Matty stung the room to new alertness. Talk burst, then was stilled by the round, terrible cursing of Cy Bisby. The old man was before Elk.

"Yes a Matty! Ebon Matty's son! Coming crawling like a snake in the grass!"

Paul Drexel's level voice trailed in the shadow of Bisby's rumble. "Why would a Matty come to us for work?" He made the question sting. "Why come under a false name?"

"To steal what he knew I would never give him!" thundered Cy Bisby, and he pointed a finger at Red River. "He brought that man to help him!"

Red River walked toward Cy Bisby. Blood from a shoulder wound was still oozing over his shirt, but he had forgotten it.

Elk blocked him. "This is my fight," he said in a frozen voice, and turned to Bisby. "I'd like to talk to you, I have a message for you. I gave a false name because you never would have listened to a Matty."

"I won't now. There's nothing for us to talk about."

"My mother is dead," Elk said with steady calm. "She sent me here."

Cy Bisby's hands clinched to squares of iron. "Mary dead?" For a second the anger that had twisted his soul for twenty years was wrenched aside. Then his face set to its old lines. "I'll talk to you this once," he said. "Just this once."

Paul Drexel brushed his arm. "Will talking to this man help?"

Bisby pushed him aside. "I'll hear Mary's last message." He turned and strode from the room, motioning Elk to follow as if to a dog.

Red River put out a hand to hold Elk

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back. The old man's face was full of rage, his lips too tight for speech. Elk met his eyes and tried to drive across a message. The old man fell away from him, moved aside to allow him to follow Cy Bisby.

BISBY determinedly kept two strides in advance of Elk Matty. He would not walk beside this child of his sister's. At the front of the office the girl with the larkspur eyes met them. She saw the tenseness of both men and drew aside. Bisby pointed at Elk.

"This man is the son of Ebon Matty. He came with a false name to entrench himself in my confidence. I hate a liar—a liar and a Matty."

The girl made no comment. Bisby turned to Elk.

"Matty," he said, "this girl is the daughter of my partner that was killed a few months back. She owns half interest in the business." He leaned forward. "Some day she'll own it all—my share will never go to a Matty." He marched into the office.

As Elk followed, he saw a startled look flame in the girl's eyes. She was placing him as a Matty. She was thinking he had come to fight for Cy Bisby's money. Elk's lips curled in a brief smile. She lifted her head and in that second a battle line was drawn.

Cy Bisby squared away on his powerful legs, his shaggy head solid on a thick neck. Hunching his heavy shoulders forward, he spoke.

"Be brief, Matty. Mary is dead, and she ain't a Matty any more. She is my sister again." His voice thickened, but there was no softness in his square face. "She could have come to me any time during those twenty-one years, but she never chose to. Now she is—gone."

For a second the realization of his loss choked him, but it only served to feed his anger. He shook his fist. "Ebon Matty was a—"

"He was my father," came the quiet voice of Elk. "Remember that while we talk. I am proud to be his son."

Cy Bisby's eyes seared him. "Your blood shows in the build of you. Back in that fight, you were a Matty through and through."

Elk hadn't moved. "I came," he said, "because my mother sent me. She asked me to make you understand she remembered all you had done for her. What you had sacrificed for her. She wanted you to know she still thought of you as her brother. She wanted—me to stay with you."

"Sent a Matty to me! Even as she died she clung to the strain. She thought of Ebon Matty's son and what he would gain by coming."

Elk's eyes stopped him. "I have given you my mother's message and you read greed into it. That's natural, I guess. You've got money on your brain. But there's some things money won't ever buy you. Loyalty. That has to be steeped in the blood. And you can't buy youth. You're getting old—you need help and you've got nobody. Nobody you can trust."

Bisby demanded hoarsely:

"And could I trust a man that comes lying and crawling like a snake?"

Elk shrugged. "I didn't like to do it. And I don't like what I'm doing now. I hate this more than you. I took abuse in that saloon today thinking of my mother's wish. I followed you through the street like a cur at heel. I gave you my mother's message. Well, I did every last single thing I said I'd do. The only other thing she wanted is out of my hands. And even for her I'm not going to crawl and beg any more."

HE turned away, leaving Cy Bisby rocking on solid legs, his anger bursting inside him. Elk walked in long, even strides toward the air he could feel free to breathe. The girl passed him on her way to the office. She put out a hand as if to stop him; then Bisby's voice roared from inside, and she hurried on.

Elk walked into the street and filled his lungs. He had fulfilled the letter of his promise but he had failed. He didn't know

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when Red River Parks joined him, but suddenly the man's voice was in his ear.

"I'm sorry if I gummed the works back yonder in the saloon, Elk." An iron-hard hand rested on his shoulder. "When I saw you blinkin' from that slap that bully took you across the face, I went hog-wild. I see now you was stakin' everything on avoidin' a fight—I'm sorry, boy."

Elk nodded that it was all right. "I failed," he said.

"Your ma was a woman," Red River said. "She asked what was impossible."

They walked along the river. The gray settled deeper into Elk's face, his gaze drove straight ahead. At last he paused and faced Red River.

"My mother asked me to stand at his side when he needed me; that part I can do. In the morning he's sending out a big mule-train for a boom camp. Thieves are waiting for that train. I've heard whispers that War-whoop Nelson has his eyes on it. I'm going to see that train goes through. Will you help?"

The older man's eyes seared the youth. "Your pa and me has took bullets for each other and called it just a day's work. But I'm not swappin' lead to protect no man that curses Eb Matty."

"I can't blame you," Elk said. "I'll ride alone."

Scorn touched Red River's next words. "And be shot for a spy if they see you. Elk, you owe somethin' to your dad. Ain't you got no pride for your name?"

"I don't expect you to understand, Red River," Elk said dully.

Red River spoke quickly, with a barely controlled fury that made his voice thin, like a strummed wire.

"*No*—I can't understand a Matty wrigglin' on his belly to a stiff-necked old fool that had cursed the name." As the words fell between them, he turned away.

Elk watched the deeper shadows of the river-brush receive him. He watched until the last tiny twig had stilled. Then he knew Red River had really left him. He turned back toward town and the lights that were beginning to blink.

IV

AS Elk Matty sat alone at his supper, Paul Drexel stopped at his table. "Are you leaving town tomorrow, Matty?"

"Is it any of your business?"

Drexel's eyes spit fire. "It's no skin off me either way, if that's what you mean. I meant that for advice."

"I didn't ask for advice."

Drexel lingered. "Matty, there's no use you trying to edge in on the old man. He hates you clean to Hell and all the way back. You could get yourself into a tight jam by hanging around; there's a steamer going to Walla Walla at midnight. If you took that folks would know it."

"I have no business in Walla Walla. If you have a piece to speak, Drexel, speak it."

Paul Drexel dropped into a chair. "I've been in a country where the Mattys roved and I know Bisby is making a mistake classing them all as cold killers. Some of them are corpse-makers of the first water, sure. Mostly they die with their boots on—mostly they are honest." He said the last slowly, his black eyes striving to pierce Elk's calmness. "I believe you are honest, otherwise I wouldn't be wasting time on you."

His quick-moving hands became still. "Cy Bisby and I are taking out a rich pack-train in the morning. If anything happened to it and you were in the country, why—" He lifted his thin brows. "You know you'd be charged with the job."

A weak smile came to Elk's lips. "Why bother to tell me that? If you're aiming to scare me off, Drexel, I don't scare easy."

Drexel rose with a sigh. "I told Tulla you'd look at it that way."

"Is Tulla the girl with the blue eyes?"

"Yes, Tulla Knight. She'd rather you didn't get into trouble."

"You might thank her for her good wishes, Drexel, and you might assure her that I am not here for any money that she considers hers. But I'm not going to Walla Walla."

A tall man in a neatly fitting dark suit

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came toward them. A belt and pistol hung loosely at his waist. He held out his hand to Elk.

"I'm Jeff Tanner," he said. His long cheeks were like sides of bacon, and his eyes vacant of expression. "I was impressed by your gun work, Matty," he went on. "I thought gun-flashes like them was buried six feet under the sod with Ebon Matty."

Elk waited for the man to make his business known. Perhaps Tanner needed a gunman. Paul Drexel lingered, although Tanner's half-turned shoulder was an invitation to leave.

"I'm opening up a saloon in the new camp on Granny Crick," Tanner said. "Start out with the goods on mules in the mornin'—am joinin' trains with Cy Bisby as he's settin' up a store there. We joined up for protection as there's indications a band of thieves is rangin' hereabouts. I'd pay you good, Matty, to ride beside my train and keep your rifle loose in its scabbard."

Paul Drexel drew a short breath. "Cy Bisby will object to Matty joining the train, Tanner. I guess you know how things stand there."

"I know, but Cy Bisby ain't hirin' my men. I'm buyin' myself some protection if possible."

"It might mean the two trains would split company."

"Nothin' of the kind. I've made a deal with Bisby, fair and square. He can't set up to hire my help for me."

Elk thought rapidly. He was ready with a reply when Jeff Tanner faced him.

"I'll take your job, Tanner."

THE next morning Lewiston turned out to see the long mule-train line out along the Clearwater River. Day was just breaking, and the mules looked top-heavy and grotesque in the thin light. Some appeared to carry bulk greater than their own weight.

Mounted men rode along and headed them into a long string. Cy Bisby's train took the lead, Jeff Tanner's smaller outfit trailed. The trip ahead lay over Indian trails and wild mountains. The camp they were headed for was a boomer, and no established trail had been beaten out.

Tanner's mules were loaded with the stuff that officially opened a new camp. Not much else was he taking, for he wasn't sure yet of the richness of the new strike. A tent stretched and barrels with boards across them would be enough for trying out the diggings.

Cy Bisby had talked briefly with Jeff Tanner on the yards before the start. "I said we'd travel together, and I've never broken my word to any man," Bisby had rumbled. "If I'd a thought you'd a hired this man," and he pointed to Elk, "I'd a seen you damned before I'd a joined with you."

Tanner's slab-sided face was blank. "Before this trip is over you may get down in the dirt and thank your stars we got a Matty with us. This road-agent business ain't no pipe dream. I'm where I hear things straight."

Cy's fiery eyes shot straight at Tanner. "I'd see my mules in Hell and every dollar gone with them before I'd accept a Matty's gun."

Tanner chuckled. "You and me differ there. I'd take a Matty ahead of some of the snake-eyed packers on your train. I been goin' to speak to you about that set of horse-thieves you been collectin.' Have you lost your eye for an honest face, Bisby?"

Bisby's wrath was smothered in Tanner's dry assurance. A fleeting worried look came into his eyes and wiped away some of the certainty from Bisby's face. Then he stiffened. "It's you that's lost your eye, Tanner," he snapped and walked away.

As the train strung out along the river and left Lewiston behind, Jeff Tanner pulled back to where Elk Matty was riding. "Bisby is as hard-shelled an old egg as I ever met," he said. "But he's honest plumb to his ornery gizzard." He shook his head. "I wasn't foolin' about bein' leary of thieves. I wish I had another man like you, Matty. That fool-headed Red River

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Parks for instance. I could use that ol' fire-eater, but he gets drinkin' in with Ace Briggs and laughs me down when I offer him a job. Ace Briggs ain't popular in this neck of the woods, he's hitched too close to War-whoop Nelson.

"Now Red River ain't no two-bit man like Ace and War-whoop. Can't understand his drinkin' in with them. He looked hard and plenty dangerous when he told me to get out of his sight. He meant it, and Red River ain't usual so jumpy. He turns a deal over 'fore he slaps it down."

Elk Matty made no comment. The name of War-whoop Nelson was the one he had heard most mentioned when men spoke of the small thievery of gold pokes. Rumor said he was lying low for a big job. This mule-train stringing along the river would be something big.

Elk was glad when Tanner was called to the head of the train. It gave him time to figure out the play. Red River Parks wasn't a man to stop a string of pack-mules and murder a crew. Red River was considering something entirely different in teaming up with Ace Briggs and War-whoop Nelson. Red was seeing a way to get back at Cy Bisby.

Bisby had called Ebon Matty foul names, and Red River fought for the few friends he had. He was squaring away now to fight the insults that had been hurled against the name of Ebon Matty—fight in his own way. Red River wouldn't know until it was too late, that Elk had hired out to Jeff Tanner.

Elk chilled at the picture he was building. Two guns that had always spoken an identical language were to blast from opposite sides. Back to back, he and Red River had faced some tough moments, now they would be toe to toe on different sides of a line.

HE SAW Tulla Knight riding along at the side of the side of the mules. It did not strike him strange that she should accompany the train, it was half hers. Paul Drexel trotted toward her, swaying easily, an expert horseman. She smiled him a greeting and for a second they leaned together in low words.

Something in their attitude recalled sharply to Elk that she had sent Drexel to warn him to leave town. Perhaps they were planning to be married. Otherwise why should Drexel have been so concerned over Elk's remaining in the country? Drexel and the girl were afraid that he might win Cy Bisby over. Elk's lips tightened to a grim smile.

Day after day the string of mules kept to their way. A wordless understanding caused the trains to camp apart at night. Elk knew his presence had frosted any friendly feeling that had existed between the two trains. But Bisby's hardness didn't bother Jeff Tanner.

"Ol' Cy never did figure the whisky business very high nohow," he said one evening to Elk as they lay on the grass smoking. "Cy has an idea that sellin' shovels and pans and sody to the miners is honester than sellin' them whisky to warm their bellies." Tanner laughed. "He'd never made a bargain to travel with me, but he knew blamed well there was truth in this road-agent scare."

The fifth evening saw them nearing their goal. Cy Bisby dropped back for a word with Jeff Tanner before they topped the last ridge.

"We're goin' to make it without trouble," he said.

Tanner nodded. "They'd a been fools to jump us on the way over, though it's been done and whole trains drove off. They're waitin' to get you on the return trip, Bisby. You'll have a smaller outfit and your wealth will be in gold."

Bisby's brows clinched above his nose. He looked straight at Elk, riding beside Tanner, and there was no mistaking the direction of his words.

"Anybody thinking of robbing Cy Bisby on the return trip, better change his mind."

Elk drove a glance square into the hard eyes. "If I was considering robbing your

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train, Bisby, your one-horse warning wouldn't mean no more than a fly buzzing —but I'm not planning on it."

Jeff Tanner cursed. "I'm tired of you and Drexel slurrin' this kid—not that he can't take his own part—but I'm gettin' a craw full. You tend to your train and I'll tend to mine."

Cy Bisby spurred his horse toward the head of the line. His gray hair was long enough to fly some in the breeze, his big body straight for his years.

Elk looked at Jeff Tanner. "Thanks."

Jeff's eyes lighted. He had been as nice to Elk as he knew how, and this was the first word of appreciation. Tanner made it a point to have the good will of men like the Mattys.

The two trains strung down the hill to the camp. Tents and brush huts spread and straggled from the creek to the hillside. Miners swarmed about as the halt was made. Cy Bisby selected a vacant spot for his store and informed the camp he would be open for business the next morning. Jeff Tanner was open within an hour. Tincups rattled and cheer began to flow.

Elk hung around Tanner's tent, watching for Red River Parks. There was no word of the old-timer, nor of War-whoop Nelson. Jeff Tanner had hired the mules that had brought his whisky in, and the next morning the train started back for Lewiston. Cy Bisby had his mules put on pasture, for he owned his own train.

"The camp is more'n a boomer," Tanner told Elk the second day. "She's goin' to hold on a while. Reckon I'll bring in some more whisky."

DAYS passed without Elk catching even a whisper of Red River. The youth lay awake at night, staring into the blackness, pulse slowing with the chill that hovered at his heart. Red River and War-whoop Nelson were staying in hiding.

The evening before the Bisby train was ready to start back, Tanner spoke to Cy. "Me and Elk Matty are ridin' back to Lewiston," he said, pausing at the corral where hubbub signified the last arrangements for an early start. "You ain't got as many men as you had comin' in, and you got a heap of gold. I got considerable dust also. Me and Elk will ride with you, Bisby. Protection for both sides."

Cy Bisby looked to Elk sitting on his big sorrel. "You are welcome, Tanner," he said. "But no Matty rides with this train."

"You're a fool, Bisby. I ain't goin' down on my knees to you. I'm offerin' for me and Elk to ride with you if you want us."

"You've had my answer."

Jeff Tanner reared his horse away from the corral. Elk put the sorrel along side, and spoke quietly.

"Tanner, you got a lot of gold on you. Better go along with Bisby."

Tanner's smile was tight. "I wasn't just chewin' the rag when I said Bisby had some men I didn't trust. The honest ones have quit since comin' to camp and found diggin's, the crooks are still with him. Drexel is smart, I can't see why he don't get it. Personally I'd fell safer with just you and me hittin' a hot train for Lewiston, but they got a lady in their train and I offered. I was turned down, so you and me hits the breeze alone."

Elk looked straight ahead. "I'm trailing the Bisby train to Lewiston, Tanner. I'm going to do my best to see it through."

Tanner searched him with those eyes that saw much and told little. "It ain't natural you'd follow that train—to protect it, Matty. There's a limit to what a man stands. By lights you're pushed beyond that limit." When Elk made no reply, he added another sentence. "You can't have no warm feelin' for Cy Bisby."

"Bisby has nothing to do with it. This is between—someone else and me."

Tanner's face grew more grave. "Maybe 'tween you and Red River Parks. I've noticed he's missing'."

They rode up to the stable and dismounted. Elk looked straight at Jeff Tanner. "I got what you mean back there," he said. "About me and Red River. I don't know where Parks is. I'd like to know."

Tanner laid a hand on Elk's shoulder.

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"Matty, let's you and me hit an early trail in the mornin'."

"No," Elk said quietly. "I'm following the Bisby train."

Tanner put away his horse. They had formed the habit of eating supper together, but this evening Tanner turned away alone. "So long, Matty," he said.

"So long," Elk answered.

Elk watched him go. If the Bisby train was robbed, there would be another witness against him.

V

ELK MATTY rode out of town ahead of the pack-trains the next morning. That day's travel would be through a treeless stretch that held little danger for the rich train. That night he knew they would stop in Denver Canyon at the Denver House.

A man named Martin Denver operated a horse-ranch and way-house at this point on the trail. Elk kept to a slow pace and held back until evening to approach the big log building. He wanted just time to get his supper and be gone before the train arrived.

He hitched his sorrel to the rack within five feet of the door, and pushed inside. He had caught a quick word and a stir just as his foot touched the narrow porch. He could see beyond the small dining room to the bar. Ace Briggs was hoisting a drink.

Then Elk saw a man flash from the dimness of a stairway leading to the dance-floor above, toward the back door. Martin Denver, the owner, and one of his men shielded the man, but Elk needed only a glimpse. Two strides took him to the door just as it was noiselessly closing on Red River Parks. As his hand reached for the knob, a voice came:

"In a yank are you, Matty?"

Elk came around onto Ace Briggs in the whirl and draw that had made more than one Matty famous. His face was a still mask, but unharnessed Hell was in his eyes. Ace Briggs hadn't been prepared for anything like that much ferocity and he went gray as Elk's gun thrust against his middle. His own gun was dead in its leather, so dead that Ace cursed profoundly.

"Kinda got yourself a tiger by the tail, ain't you, Ace?" Martin Denver asked. "Why don't you let loose of him?"

Elk laid his hand a second time on the doorknob, and this time no voice stayed him. He backed out of the room, and Ace Briggs didn't make a move—no, not so much as an twitched eyelash—to stop him.

His voice boomed as the door slammed.

"If that's the Matty style, everybody can have their Mattys!"

Elk ran toward the shelter of the willows along the creek. He called softly once. The echoes mocked him. Then he heard a horse gallop away.

Elk made no move to get his sorrel and follow. If Red River Parks didn't want to be caught, it was wasting time to give chase. And Red didn't want to see Elk Matty, he had showed that clearly. Anger began to ease the pain that had cut through him.

He went back into the house and ordered supper. Ace Briggs was gone now and Martin Denver seemed anxious to talk.

"Glad to see you come up with a drop on Ace Briggs," he said warmly. "Danged if I don't get tired hearin' his big talk. Maybe he won't be so windy for a spell."

"Who was the fellow in such a hurry to leave as I came?" Elk asked.

"A stranger that rode up. Nobody seemed to know him."

Elk knew Denver was lying. Red River had probably instructed Denver to keep his lips set tight. Answering questions soon ruined a man's business.

Elk paid for his meal, mounted his sorrel and rode away. After a half mile, he circled back and hid his horse below the stable.

He had worked carefully back to the willows along the creek when he caught the first sound of the coming mule-train. Denver's was a long trip for a train and it

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was now dark. A man came onto the porch and listened.

"The Bisby train is comin'," he called to Martin Denver.

Denver and the two men that worked about the place came onto the narrow porch that stretched along the front of the log building. They listened to be sure and low talk flew between them.

Gradually a long snaky shadow crawled from the trees sheltering the road at the creek-crossing and straightened out toward the sheds and barns across the road from the house.

Two horses cut away from the train and came at a gallop. Denver and the two men turned hastily to the interior and began putting everything to rights. Elk watched them. It struck him that this were an odd thing to do. Perhaps it was done in honor of Tulla Knight.

The two riders coming ahead of the train were Tulla and Drexel. Elk was close enough to hear the greeting Martin Denver extended to them, for the creek with its sheltering willows, crowded the front corner of the house and wound to the back.

"I've had word you were coming, Miss Knight," Denver called as she came ahead of Drexel up the path. "I'm glad to be able to offer you a quiet place. Sometimes the Denver House is a bit noisy, but this evening it's been quiet as a tomb."

"Good!" Paul Drexel cried. "Get that iron safe of yours open, Denver, and start supper cooking."

THE packers took the train to the meadows surrounding the stables, and it was evident their camp would be as usual. Two more riders approached the house. One of them was Cy Bisby. He began untying sacks from his saddle and his companion did likewise. Drexel went down to his horse, and the three of them returned to the house with heavy packages.

"We'll keep an eye on that safe tonight, even if it is bomb-proof," Drexel said to the horse rancher.

Martin Denver laughed. "Your dust will be as safe as if it was in the Devil's hip pocket." He led them into the house.

The door was closed and blankets dropped over the open windows as the gold was stored in the iron safe in a corner of the dining room.

Elk moved up to a cottonwood beside the end window and watched the room through a crack as the blanket bellied in the breeze. He wanted to see who that tall man was that had ridden to the house with Cy Bisby.

The group about the safe eased back and Martin Denver slammed the door.

"You shut it too soon," Paul Drexel said. "Jeff Tanner here has his strapped under his shirt."

Then the tall man was Jeff Tanner. Elk was glad, for there was strength wrapped up in the angular body, and a crafty brain worked behind the lined face.

"Never mind to open the safe," Tanner said. "I'll keep my dust with me."

The blanket at the window was yanked back for air and the front door reopened. Denver pulled a table and chairs to the center of the room and asked his guests to get comfortable while he went to the kitchen to see everything was going right.

Drexel turned to the saloonman when they were alone. "You're foolish to worry yourself with that gold tonight. This is one night we can sleep without fearing an attack."

"Them two men workin' for Denver look like they belong behind bars," Tanner said bluntly.

Drexel's anger leaped. "You're slow at reading character, Tanner. Elk Matty had to come plain out and tell you he was after this train before you'd believe he was a thief!"

"I ain't made no statements regardin' Matty's character yet," Tanner said dryly.

"But you came to us for protection!" Drexel's wrath was climbing.

Tulla laid a hand on Drexel's arm and he shut up. "Jeff was wrong about Matty, and he was big enough to come and tell us when he found out," she said. "Let's not quarrel among ourselves."

Martin Denver, himself, brought in their

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supper. "I thought I heard you mention the name of Matty," he said. "It reminded me of something. I said it had been quiet here this evening. Well it has, except when Elk Matty blew in. He showed a nasty temper over something the boys gave him for his supper and yanked a gun like he was going to shoot up the place."

Drexel snapped up the words. "Matty's prowling around her, is he?" He turned to Jeff Tanner. "Better put that gold you're wearing in the safe. Matty knows just how you strap it on and—"

Tanner's face was marble. "I'll manage my own gold, Drexel."

Cy Bisby flared: "I don't know but what I'd be pleased to see Matty lift that dust offen you, Tanner."

The saloonman smiled at Cy Bisby. "I've judged a heap of men and done it mostly on the fly and across bars and along gun-barrels. I've met them with reps, good and bad. I come and told you Matty was followin' this train because I couldn't do otherwise. Something mighta happened. I say, *mighta*. I ain't sure Elk Matty was lyin' about guardin' it."

"You're stubborn as an ox or a fool!" Cy Bisby rumbled.

"Tulla pointed to the supper with a tired sigh. "Let's eat."

Drexel reached across and touched her hand. "You're tired," he said softly. "Tonight you have nothing to worry about. None of us has. We'll get good sleep. The rest of the journey will go fast."

She smiled her appreciation, and it seemed to Elk their eyes held inner messages.

He slipped quietly back from the cottonwood to the willows of the creek. Martin Denver had deliberately lied, and he was keeping from his guests the fact that Ace Briggs and Red River Parks had been there. He was building up in them a false feeling of safety.

JEFF TURNER was the first man to push back his chair. He passed to the narrow porch and sat down on one of the split logs that had been made into a bench. He rolled a smoke and sat watching the mules grazing the meadow across the road by the barns.

Paul and Cy and Tulla finished eating and Bisby asked about the beds. Martin Denver pointed to the stairway that led to the floor above which was divided into a dancing hall and sleeping quarters. Drexel said he would make the rounds of the train before settling for the night.

"Get your smoke finished and be ready to turn in by the time I get back," he said to Bisby. "I'll take the first watch."

"No need to keep a watch," Martin Denver said. "I have one man that stays up all night for chance customers."

"Drexel and I aren't both sleeping at the same time," Cy Bisby said tartly, and Denver was too smart to push his point.

Elk drifted with the willows of the creek to the stable and on to his sorrel horse.

The packers were camped at a shed far enough away to cause him no concern. Slowly he led the horse a safe distance, mounted and made a half circle that landed him back across the road and in the willows above the house. He again hid his sorrel.

He sat a while thinking before he returned to a spot commanding the window. He was convinced Martin Denver was working with Ace Briggs and Red River Parks. There wouldn't be anything more to learn from Drexel and Bisby, but he hoped to pick up a word between the road-house-keeper and his two men.

Drexel was just returning from his rounds as Elk slid in beside the big cottonwood by the front window.

Cy Bisby was climbing the stairs to bed. When he was halfway up the short flight, the back door of the road house flew open and a boy Elk had seen doing early chores about the stables burst in. His face was green under the light of the two lamps.

Martin Denver grabbed him, and Elk saw the man's face had tightened as though a puckering string had been drawn. The fierceness of his grip shook some of the terror from the boy.

"I sent you to bed an hour ago!"

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"I heard something on the crick! I went to look—!"

Paul Drexel moved close and Cy Bisby crashed down from the stairs. Bisby knocked Denver's hand from the boy's shoulder.

"What did you see?"

"A dead man!"

The lad's cry was shrill and for a second stopped life in the room. Elk saw Tulla at the head of the stairs. She began to descend stiffly, like a sleepwalker. The grayness of her face was shocking.

Cy Bisby reached for the rifle he had stood by the wall. "Take a look outside, Drexel," he ordered. "This might not prove such a safe place as we figured. *Where's Tanner?"*

Drexel paused in the quick move he had made for the door. "Where is Tanner?" he repeated tonelessly.

"I spoke to him while you were gone to see the train," Martin Denver said smoothly. "I told him a bed was ready upstairs. He growled something about spreading a blanket down by the mules."

Drexel let out a relieved breath. Tulla was down stairs now, fully dressed. Elk took time to wonder about this, then Drexel's cry from near the spring, froze his thoughts.

"It's Jeff Tanner!"

VI

THE room was vibrant with the atmosphere of death. The lank form of Tanner lay on a bench and chair. Cy Bisby turned a stained knife in his hands, then handed it toward Martin Denver. Denver shook his head at the unspoken question.

"Never saw no knife such as that."

Paul Drexel let out a charged breath. "This is Matty's work!" The breeze had died and the echoes hung. Drexel was still panting from his efforts in dragging Tanner inside. He looked over the room and saw Tulla for the first time.

"Get back to bed," he said roughly.

Her eyes were dark and unfathomable, her body rigid. She walked over and laid a hand on Tanner's forehead.

"He's dead," she said chopping the words short. She looked toward the iron chest by the stairway. "Gold turns men into wolves."

Drexel spoke softly. "Tulla, you can't help. Go to bed."

For a second she looked out through the uncovered window and Elk felt the power in her eyes. She was still a dead white, and her hand trembled as she lifted it from Tanner's forehead. She turned and climbed the stairs, and in the stillness came the closing of a door above.

The door was closed and blankets were cast down before the windows. Men stepped lightly and the old house grew solemn.

Elk slunk through the willows toward the spring. There might be some sign about. War-whoop Nelson or Ace Briggs had done the murder perhaps, after Denver had sent them word Tanner was packing the gold on him.

Denver was a part of the black plans that centered on the Bisby pack-train, otherwise why would he have lied to Drexel and Cy Bisby. Elk's lips gripped tight on one thing—Red River didn't know of this murder. Red River Parks would be no part of any plan necessitating a knife in the back.

Elk heard a door being cautiously opened and kept to the willows. The spring was now before him. Tanner had perhaps come here to get a drink. The bucket that earlier had stood on the flat board covering was gone. Tanner might have been stooping, letting the bucket down to water when the knife was thrust home.

The door Elk had heard opening was the back upstairs one, and a flight of steep, uncovered steps led from it to the brushy back yard. It was an easy exit for any person not wishing to be seen from the front. Everything about Denver's place made skulking an easy job. Brush was thick on the creek and a short distance back of the house was a heavy stand of young trees.

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The form on the stairs was silhouetted now and Elk saw it was Tulla Knight.

She came straight for the spring, knelt down on the boards covering it and lifted the lid. She began to draw up the bucket whose rope had been made fast at the top so it would not be dropped to the water by careless hands. There had not been a second of hesitation in her movements, she had come to the spring for a purpose.

She pulled it up slowly and Elk knew there was a load in the bucket. She brought it to the surface, took out three sacks and turned hastily to the deep shadows of the creek willows. She dropped the load she had taken from the bucket into the shallow water and began to pile loose rock over it.

Elk reached out and touched her arm as she rose. "Don't make a sound," he commanded.

He steadied her as she swayed. He could feel the fear that contracted her muscles, but he felt no pity.

"That was Jeff Tanner's gold you just hid," he whispered.

"Who are you?"

"Elk Matty. The murderer must have heard me coming back with my horse and been forced to hide the gold in the spring. He sent you to take it to a safer place."

UNDERSTANDING came to Elk as he whispered into the girl's ear. Martin Denver wasn't the man who had sent her; he had helpers to do such jobs, and Cy Bisby hadn't done it. He didn't stop to analyze why he eliminated Bisby—it was something too swift for thought that made him know the old square-faced man was not connected with a cowardly murder.

It had to be Paul Drexel. Elk remembered the wordless messages he had seen pass between Drexel and this girl.

"I thought Ace Briggs or Nelson had done the job until you came," he said. "Now I know it's Drexel." His fingers tightened their grip. His lips came an inch closer to her face. "Drexel killed Jeff Tanner."

Her body contracted. "Yes," she breathed.

"And sent you to move the gold to a safer hiding place."

He was surprised at the strength that flowed to the slim muscles. She fought to be free of his grasp and it was no easy job to hold her. Then she quieted. "I didn't come for the gold at Paul Drexel's order," she whispered fiercely.

She pointed to the sleeping quarters in the log house. "I couldn't sleep. I was watching from the window and saw Drexel follow Jeff Tanner into the shadows. I thought they were going to investigate something they had heard. Only Drexel came back." Sobs choked her.

There was no loosening of the grip on her arm.

"You think I am lying," she said dully.

"I can't afford to make a mistake." He went on speaking against his will. "When I first saw you, I thought everything about you was good. Even yet, your eyes and mouth don't seem to go with evil. I should have known by your sending Drexel to warn me to get out of town."

"I didn't know Drexel tried to make you leave." She said the words with a fever climbing in her low whisper. "If he wanted to be rid of you, maybe—" She reached out now and clutched him with her free hand. "Paul Drexel may not stop with Jeff Tanner's gold. He may be after it all!"

Elk heard her, but he was also hearing something else. Men were in the black tongue of trees at the opposite side of the house. He shoved the girl back farther into the thicket.

"Stay there. Men are coming at the house. Bisby is going to need help."

He had to get moving now. They were ready; there was only a minute or two left.

She clung to his arm. "Uncle Cy will kill you! Drexel is fast with his gun."

Elk loosened her fingers. Part of his mind was following the men who were now advancing quietly from the trees. "There's a sorrel horse back in the wil-

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lows," he said. "Get on him and ride for the camp you left this morning."

She drew a small gun from her blouse. "I'll go ahead and warn Uncle Cy—"

He grabbed her back. "This isn't going to be any fight for a girl—it's going to be to the finish. Paul Drexel can't afford to stop short of death; those men coming from the trees would spit in the Devil's eye!"

He left her then; his mind leaping to the battle ahead. He had caught a glimpse of three men. They would be the two killers, War-whoop Nelson and Ace Briggs, and Red River Parks. Red River fought with swift, deadly cunning; he was more formidable than Nelson and Briggs combined.

In that instant before action Elk had to close his mind to his life-long memory of Red River Parks. He must think of nothing now but this—that he was about to keep a certain promise.

Elk reached the cottonwood by the front of the house just as a man banged open the door leading from the porch to the dining room, and issued a command for everyone to elevate. War-whoop Nelson barged into the room on the tail of the words.

"Up, blast you!"

PAUL DREXEL and Martin Denver lifted their hands. Cy Bisby stood on spread legs, a rifle cradled in his arm. Nelson had a cold drop on him, but he made no move to obey the man's command.

Elk was at the window, the blanket gathered in his hand. One yank and he could bring it down. There were no seconds to be wasted, yet he waited for an indication of the position of Ace Briggs and Red River. A form materialized in the doorway between the dining room and the bar room.

Ace Briggs brought a pistol to a level. "H'st 'em, Bisby!" he commanded at the old man's back.

Cy Bisby leaped for the table as he swung up his rifle. Elk Matty jerked the blanket from the window and landed inside. One gun roared as he threw a leg over the sill; then the hand he had used for pulling down the blanket was filled with a second death weapon.

"It's Matty!" came Drexel's warning cry.

War-whoop Nelson swerved his gun toward this fresh danger a split second too soon and the bullet that was aimed for Bisby's heart, plowed through his shoulder. Nelson's blood-curdling battle cry was snapped off as Elk's bullet found a vital spot.

The man sprawled his great length across the small space. His crash shook the building and in that second Martin Denver and Paul Drexel saw the fight they had considered as easy contorted into a battle for their own lives.

Drexel's hand went for his holstered pistol, but a bullet stayed the move and sent him drunkenly to the wall.

Denver ducked quickly behind a heavy overturned table, and the next moment his gun was thundering.

Elk was crouched over his guns, solidly keeping his stand by the window.

A bullet swayed him for a second, then he was steady again, eyes cutting through the smoke, guns laying down reports with the precision of drum beats. He saw Cy Bisby take a charge of lead from the gun of Ace Briggs, but the solid old man rolled to his side and gave Briggs back extra measure. The killer's gun dropped from his hand and he slid to the floor.

Denver and his two assistants were still fighting. Three men still on their feet. Three. Dully Elk's brain recorded the fact. More lead had found his body and he was less steady.

He continued firing coolly, carefully, but he no longer felt the guns in his hands. They were something apart from him; they seemed to have an intelligence of their own.

Through the groans of the dying and the curses of the living came a voice that pumped fear into Elk's veins. Red River Parks was rising shadowly at the right.

"I got you cold, Elk," came a threat in

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a toneless voice the youth knew by heart. "Drop your smoke-irons!"

THE fear was gone and fire spread through Elk's sluggish veins. The deadly gun of Red River became an urge that reinforced his weakening body. The step he made backward was lightning swift, and the move of his right hand was shadowy. Flame spit from his gun. Then he was facing front again toward the forward surge of Denver and his two men.

Another gust of roaring guns and Martin Denver was stumbling. His two men leaped for the door, the desire for battle washed from their gray faces. The smoke fog was thick; Elk swung about remembering Red River. The suddenness of the effort almost upset him. His gun was heavy in his right hand, his left hand was empty. Red River was standing rigidly, his gun several feet in front of him in the floor. It came to Elk that his single shot had disarmed the man.

"You saved your skin with the speed your dad bred into you," Red River said evenly.

Elk looked at him. "You were going to kill me."

"You need it," came the same toneless voice. "You've sold your dad out. I come here to take pay from the man that cursed Ebon Matty; your guns is here defendin' him." Red River's voice lost its calm. "I'd rather you killed me than have to go on rememberin' you this way!"

"I didn't shoot to kill you," Elk said to him. "You were here to burn me down!"

Tulla Knight rose from beside Cy Bisby. She had slid in through the back door and now she approached the two men.

"This man didn't try to kill you," she said to Elk. "You missed him with your shot—he threw his gun away." She turned to Red River, and as she spoke she looked down at the small gun in her own hand. "I was watching."

The grim determination that had held Elk Matty to his feet began to dissolve. The pistol dropped from his relaxing fingers; his strength was crumbling. "See about helpin' the wounded," he said to Red River. "Then you and I will ride out of here. This band of thieves is broken—I'm ready to go now, Red River."

The hardness that had kept the old man standing like rock, lifted. Life brushed across his face. "You mean you're finished here?" he asked.

Elk nodded and began to fold to the floor. Red River waved the girl back fiercely and lowered him alone.

VII

RED RIVER PARKS and Tulla Knight had brought the wounded back to the mining camp. The doctor wasn't grim over Elk Matty, although he had removed four bullets, but he said Cy Bisby was probably done for.

There were few places in the new camp fit for wounded men, so Elk and Cy Bisby lay in the same room. That evening Bisby's mind cleared and he looked across at Eik with bright, hard eyes.

"You are as fighting a Matty as the strain ever produced," he said. "Maybe all those years, Mary saw in Ebon Matty what he passed on to you. Courage like you have is no accident!"

He lay pondering, and when he spoke again, his voice wavered less. "War-whoop Nelson and Ace Briggs were cold killers, they went down; Denver and Drexel were black-hearted rascals, they went down. You were fighting honestly, with a speed and a nerve that was bred into the marrow of your bones."

He lifted on his elbow. Elk called to Tulla to come and force him back. The girl and Red River came swiftly.

Cy Bisby resented the interruption. "I've been wrong," he said. "Wrong about Ebon Matty—he couldn't have been a killer and produced such a son. He was a fighter, a man without fear. All these years I've thought of my sister as being married to a killer. I've been wrong!"

He was silent after that, seemingly weaker. But the doctor who had called Cy Bisby done for had not known how

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much granite there was in the old man. Cy Bisby had made up his mind to keep on living.

The days wore along, and one evening Red River Parks gazed longer than usual into the sunset. Elk was able to sit out in the shade of the cabin now with Red River and the girl. Cy Bisby was still confined to his bed, but each hour he was growing more determined to get up. Red River watched the warm glow in the west.

"There's a trail windin' off yonder that looks interestin'," he said with eyes unwavering. "I reckon it's callin' me."

Tulla drew a startled breath as though she had been fearing such words. She looked to Elk and saw his lips had tightened. That morning Cy Bisby had asked his nephew to stay with him always, to learn the business that would some day be his. Tulla knew Red River had heard, for she had seen him moving silently away from the cabin. His face had been gray and old.

"I ain't nowise givin' to stayin' in one place," Red River said to nobody in particular. "I felt the ol' movin' itch comin' on today, and I tacked a missin' shoe on my horse."

He continued to stare off into the distance, and the tough fiber seemed to have suddenly gone out of his body. He slouched there, almost as if he were tired.

"I'm not able to hit the trail yet," Elk said quietly. "You'll have to scratch that itch for another week."

"I calculate to go in the mornin'," Red River replied. "This itch ain't one that responds to scratchin'." He looked up and met Elk's gaze. "You ain't ridin' no more of them dim trails, lad. Your dad always said he hoped you'd amount to somethin' on account of your ma. Me, I've always known you'd settled down some day and be somebody."

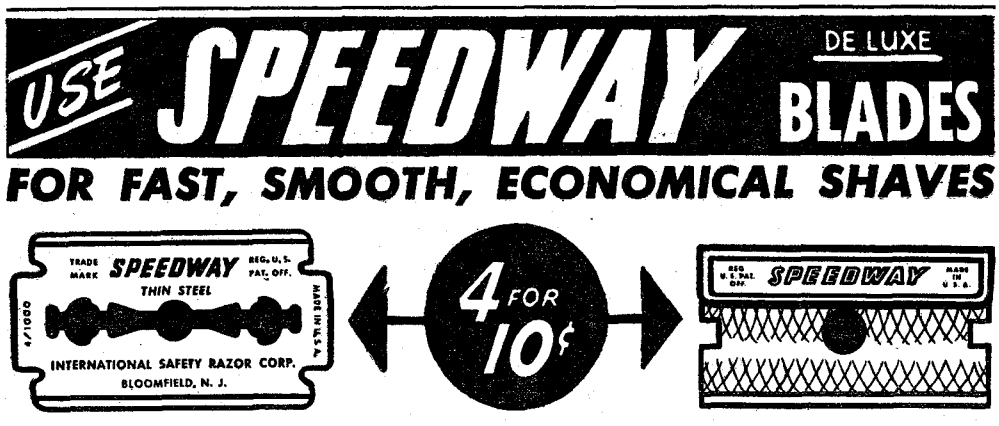
He nodded slowly.

Tulla Knight went to Red River and slipped her hand into his. He removed his hat to show her he appreciated. "You can't run off and leave Elk," she said. "He won't be able to ride for a long time; he needs you to look after the pack trains that Uncle Cy is placing in his hands. And who will I have to depend on, with Uncle Cy and Elk crippled, if you go?" She shook her head. "You can't go."

Elk Matty was leaning forward in his chair. "That's right," he said in a quick, firm voice.

He said it to Red River, but then his eyes went quickly to the girl. She met his glance and held it, and he saw on her lips the smile he was looking for.

Red River Parks looked to the man, then back to the girl. "If I hadn't a trotted him on my knee when he wasn't bigger than a pint of whisky, I wouldn't listen. Me, Red River Parks, a gol-blamed packer!"



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Loot Lies Deep

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

CHAPTER XXV

PAYOFF FOR TWO

IT IS queer, now, thinking back, that the details of that last terrible night aboard the *Condor* don't stand out more clearly in my memory. I was drunk with fatigue, I guess, for I hadn't had more than a few five-minute cat-naps since Sunday night and this, after midnight, was Wednesday.

I remember stumbling around the deck lugging a rifle which seemed to weigh a thousand pounds, and tripping over things I could see, and tried to step over, but didn't lift my leaden feet high enough to miss.

Other things come to mind, fuzzy as very soft-focus pictures. Eating things put into my hands by Linda and wondering, just a few minutes later, what it was I had eaten and failing to recall.

I drank things she gave me, too. Even now, after all this time, I have only to drink something made with rum, and I find myself thinking of those stinging drinks she quietly passed me in the darkness, and of how their sharp pungency shocked the breath out of me, for a moment clearing my brain of its fog.

Oh, the others stood their watches in the stern. I saw to that. It took their minds off their troubles and it was a double check upon me, for I was becoming uncertain that my sleep-dazed senses would register the coming of the mutineers in time to do anything about it.

So I routed them out in their turn, all except Hoke Scanlon. Hoke was a fighting man. And I wanted to build his strength up as much as I could against the time when he would have to take his place in the battle I felt certain was coming.

The mutineers got aboard during Mrs. Taver's watch. Toward the last of it, just before dawn. I was in the lounge, keeping an eye on Hoke and now and then going on deck to see how Mrs. Taver was making out.

Linda was there, too. I know Linda slept some of the time, but don't ask me when it was. I never saw her at it.

I was sitting in the big chair beside Hoke. Linda, as bright-eyed and alert as if she had slept her full eight hours, had just changed Hoke's bandages and was now sipping a cup of hot coffee over in the corner. I had just finished a cup, too. At least I suppose it was coffee because that's what she was drinking.

Hoke opened his black eyes and looked up at the ceiling for a while before he swung them toward me.

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"A mess, Bat," he said, wheezily.

"Yeah," I agreed. "A mess."

"It looked foolproof."

"Nothing's foolproof," I said, "when it takes murder to put it over."

"You might be right," he conceded. Then, after a very long time, "Bat, never in my life did I kill a man with a knife."

"What's the difference—" I shrugged—"between killing him with a knife and having him killed with a knife?"

"All right," he said, weakly. "You think you're pretty smart. But in some ways you're dumb as well as butt-headed. Play around with this thought for a while: I didn't have Timmons and Bosworth murdered. I didn't try to cut your throat."

I looked at him for a while. "Then who did?" I demanded.

"I don't know. It might have been Garside. Maybe he planned this mutiny all along and got rid of the two who knew wireless so we wouldn't yell for help and get the Venezuelan *Guarda Costa* out here."

"Suspecting him," I said, "why didn't you put in somewhere on the way down and ship a new mate?"

"For the reason I told you, mainly. The red tape would have kept us in port for weeks, maybe months. Then, too, I was afraid you'd tell Mrs. Taver about my record and she'd call off the voyage."

He glanced sharply at me. "You're a pretty good guesser, Bat. That engineer, Swenson, I killed on the freighter was the same bird I picked up—the sole survivor from the wreck of the *Ulvik*. But he did attack me. I did have to kill him in self-defense. Just the same, if you had opened that up again, it wouldn't have done me any good. So I didn't want to stop anywhere along the way."

THE curious thing is that I believed him. He was too sick right now to bother with complicated lying. And there was something convincing about the way he spoke.

Oh, I can't explain it; maybe it was the knowledge that at any moment we might be attacked and murdered, maybe it was the dead feeling of the yacht as she lay impaled upon the reef. Anyway, I found myself believing every word he spoke. Laboriously I gathered my thoughts together.

"If Garside did the murdering so nobody would report by radio," I said, slowly, "I can understand it. But I don't see why they tried to murder me, too."

"Maybe they knew you'd be hard to handle, Bat, when the blowoff came. One less witness, one less guy to pop in the jaw, or shoot, at the last minute."

"All right," I said, "now we're telling the truth, what was the idea of offering to let me take the sailing dinghy and carry—" I looked at Linda. She was listening wide-eyed and intent. "—carrying most of the women with me? But *not* taking Art Hislop?"

"Art and I planned that out," Hoke said with a rueful grin. "You see, we figured on bringing up four millions in gold. He and I figured we could hold back about a million bucks and nobody would ever be able to prove we did it if you weren't here to watch us bring it abroad. In addition to our shares, I mean.

"That's why I bought the *Condor* from Mrs. Hislop. There's nothing in the world as hot as a stolen boat. At every port in the world they have a description of it, and we'd be picked up in no time at all.

"We intended to go out to the South Seas and do trading there. It seems Art Hislop figured he was about washed up in New York and he wanted to get a new start somewhere."

"He wasn't going to take Vicky with him?" Linda put in.

"Not hardly," Hoke said, and his eyes met mine in a meaningful stare.

I knew what he was thinking, and he knew I knew. Linda was to be the only woman passenger.

"I think," I said in a gritty voice, "that I'll go and have a nice little chitchat with Art Hislop."

"Take it easy," Hoke advised. "You've got plenty of time for your chitchat. He

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hasn't got anywhere to go. And you may need him to help hold off the crew when they come aboard."

That was good sense. I relaxed—for the moment.

"Another reason I wanted you to leave the ship, Bat," Hoke went on, "I figured you'd have to give me the letter you hid somewhere aboard. I didn't like that letter business. I didn't like knowing that any shipyard I went into for overhaul was likely to find it and start asking all sorts of questions. It seemed like a jinx, sort of, that I wanted to get rid of."

"In the morning, Hoke," I said, slowly, "I'm going to dig up that letter and give it to you. If we get safely off this yacht, and you're able to come back and salvage her, you'll feel better for having that letter."

The grin that came to his face then was likable.

"I will, at that," he admitted.

"Let me ask you one more question," I said. "Did you ever see any of the sailors using the knife that killed Buck—and probably killed Timmons, too? It was about this long. It had a sharp-pointed blade and an unusual handle. The handle was of light colored bone, with corrugations along the edge to fit your fingers into."

"No," he said after a moment's thought, "but—"

There was a queer little gasp from Linda. I stared at her. Her face was the color of chalk.

"I—I've seen it, Bat," she said.

But that was as far as she got. She let out her breath in a long, tired sigh and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

"Well!" Hoke exclaimed. "If that isn't something."

But I was already halfway across the floor, all the sleepiness shocked out of me.

I never even got to her side. From the deck came the staccato slam of a gun shot, a wild scream from Grace Taver and the scurry of running feet overhead.

"That tears it," said Hoke Scanlon in a discouraged tone. "The crew is back aboard."

I SWERVED away from Linda and sprinted for the door, leaving her right there on the floor. It wouldn't do her any harm. The mutineers would.

And except for Mrs. Taver, there wasn't a soul on deck. Art and Vicky Seymour were asleep in their cabins. I cursed myself savagely as I raced through the doghouse, knowing I should never have left Grace Taver there alone.

I popped out on deck. The rifles were stacked against the doghouse wall, but for in-fighting I couldn't be bothered with so cumbersome a weapon. My automatic was already in my fist.

The first person I saw was Grace Taver. She was standing flatfooted beside the rail, holding a big automatic with both hands. She was facing forward, her bulging figure stiff with fear. And as I glanced at her she pulled the trigger and sent two more shots blasting forward along the deck.

I plummeted past the screen of the deck house, pivoting on the ball of my right foot to get into firing position. And in my first look forward it seemed as if there were a hundred men on deck and pouring up over the bow.

Four or five were already racing aft: a couple of them with guns, another with a boathook and one with something that looked like a big end wrench. All these things I saw in the space of three or four swift heartbeats.

A tall guy was far in the lead. He was bounding aft along the deck on legs as long as those of a crane, a gun pushed out in front of him, his mouth opened for a yell I never heard at all.

"Grace!" I snarled. "Get back of the house, here!"

The tall guy made a mark I couldn't miss. I didn't even bother to sight my gun, he was that close, that far out ahead of the others. Flame from my automatic licked out at him and even above the lifting noise on deck I could hear the bullet smash its way into him.

He dropped his big revolver. He grabbed at his belly and kept on coming, but

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it was only his momentum that carried him along. His knees were buckling and he was bending lower and lower over his pressing hands.

The man actually passed me while he was still on his feet. But he wasn't interested in me any more, nor in Grace Taver. I guess he wasn't much interested in anything, just about then. He went by me in that odd, bent-knee gallop and almost reached the binnacle before his folding body went off balance and he flopped to the deck like an old scarecrow.

I was paying strict attention to the others now, but I could hear this bird thrashing around in back of me. If I had had time I'd have turned and put another and more merciful bullet into him, but I was too busy. And anyway, he had asked for it, hadn't he?

I can see it now, that wild scene of violence on the moon-painted deck of the stranded yacht. The lifeboat, apparently tied to the bow and rubbing against the forward plates. Men still swarming over the rail, like firemen at a wall-climbing drill. Others, all in white, or in steward's uniforms of white jackets and black pants, coming aft.

But more carefully now. They weren't charging straight down the high side of the deck. They were coming aft in short, zigzagging dashes, sprinting from sailbox to ventilator, from skylight to mast. But coming, nevertheless.

And Grace Taver, moving around behind me and into the shelter of the deck house. Pathetically trying, amid all that confusion, to explain how all this had happened.

". . . and they must have drifted down with the wind," she was saying in a shell-shocked voice, "because I never heard . . ."

What did it matter how it had happened? It was enough that they were on board.

A solid white figure took its place beside me, peered for a moment around the steel corner of the deck house.

"That's stopping them, Bat," said Hoke Scanlon's voice, stronger than it had been since he had been wounded. "You stay here. I'll watch the port side."

BUT I hadn't stopped them. They just happened at that moment to be mostly behind one shelter or another. So while I was waiting for them to show themselves I sent a couple of ranging shots all the way forward into the group of four or five who had just swarmed over the rail.

They scattered, and in an instant were all hiding again. I heard Hoke's gun roar from the low side of the doghouse behind me. It was comforting, the knowledge he was there. He was a scoundrel and all that, but he was worth a regiment of Art Hislops in a fight like this.

Where, I wondered, was Art Hislop now? And Vicky? And Linda, who must have had plenty of time to come out of her faint? It seemed as if hours had gone by since I had heard Grace Taver's scream. Now I realized scarcely two minutes had dragged past. That's the way time slows down during catastrophe.

I slipped another clip into my gun while I was waiting. Waiting? No, that's a relative term. There wasn't much waiting when the forward half of a ship is crowded with flitting, dodging, yelling men, when the reek of gunsmoke bites into your nostrils, when your intelligence tells you that soon they'll be standing over you and throwing slugs down into your squirming body until the last breath of life has been blown out of you.

Two more came running aft from the shadows of the mainmast. My gun blazed. So did Grace's. She was taking it all right. And giving it, too.

The two men dived behind skylights. One of them lifted his voice and squalled obscenities until I wanted to hunt him out and plug his foul mouth forever.

But I knew I'd be dead long before I reached him. So I waited my chance.

Hoke Scanlon's voice came to me above the gunfire.

"You better find out what that rat Hislop's doing!" he warned.

I saw one of the attacking men disap-

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pear down the forward companionway which led to the crew's quarters. Another followed, and a third. Not so good, that. They could come aft through the passageways, the entire length of the ship.

"Can you hold them, Hoke?" I yelled.

"Sure," Hoke called with a calmness I was far from sharing. "Find Hislop. If in doubt, shoot the rat!"

I SCRAMBLED around to the doorway leading into the doghouse. There were the two girls, Linda and Vicky, hurrying on deck to help. Linda seemed to be walking through a fog. But she was walking. Walking to help us.

"Where's Art?" I said, stopping directly before Vicky.

"I wish I knew!" she wailed. "I think he's up to something. Don't—don't hurt him, *please!*"

I was running again, thinking what a fine request that was to make. Through the lounge and down into the passageway, wondering what it was Vicky thought her weasel-eyed boy friend might be up to. But apparently Hoke Scanlon thought he might be up to something, too, else he would not have suggested I find Hislop while all this Hell was raging on deck.

I remembered his room, hammered on the panel. No answer. I twisted the knob. The door swung inward. The cabin was black. I found the switch. Light blazed in the room, almost blinding me. Art Hislop was not here.

I didn't fool around any. Too well did I remember those men who had ducked through the crew's companionway. Any second now they'd be sprinting up the passageways, through lounge and doghouse to attack the defenders on the stern in a flanking movement which would be the final straw.

I rushed out of the room and went forward along the tilting passageway at top speed. At the steel bulkhead which cut the after end of the engineroom off from the owner's part of the ship I hesitated for an instant with my hand on the heavy door.

Should I dog this door down—or the one at the forward end of the engineroom? The forward one, I decided. No telling what the crew would do to that delicate and expensive machinery if they ran amuck there.

So I swung the door inward on its heavy and well-oiled hinges. I had left one small, unshaded drop-light turned on in the engineroom. But my eyes were accustomed to darkness and there was plenty of illumination there to enable me to see something that brought me up standing.

The opposite doorway—at the other end of the engineroom—was open and I could see Art Hislop, gun in hand, talking and gesturing excitedly to four members of the crew.

As I stood there, shocked into immobility by what I saw, one of the sailors lifted his eyes, looked across Art Hislop's shoulder and saw me standing there. His lips moved.

Art Hislop spun around, stared at me for a split second. Then, without warning, he swung his gun up, steadied it upon me and began to shoot.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOLOCAUST

THERE'S an old saying, "The hand is quicker than the eye." In this case, however, my muscles were quicker than my thoughts. Instinct alone made me pick up my feet and flop loosely to the greasy deckplates. And instinct alone was what saved my life.

A bullet whipped viciously past—exactly where my descending head had been only a heartbeat before. The slug clanged against the steel bulkhead and ricocheted wildly around the engineroom, quadrupling its noise before it spent its force and dropped harmlessly to the gratings somewhere on the starboard side.

Another shot and still another searched for me, banging around the engineroom like incredibly wicked bees, as Art Hislop's gun flamed again and again at the spot where I had stood an instant ago.

Almost before my body had flopped on

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the deck I had started to roll sidewise into the blessed protection of the auxiliary generator, which was bumbling along just as if it were furnishing juice for suave, sophisticated diners instead of for savage-eyed men and women who only wanted to kill one another off, and as speedily as possible.

Before I peeped around the side of that pint-sized Diesel, three or four more bullets banged against it and went whining off at odd angles, like the ball in a three-cushion billiards.

I got my head very low and peered toward that forward door. My cheek was scarcely an inch from the gratings. They were hesitating there, three or four sailors and Art Hislop.

Their eyes were wide and expanded as they searched for me—and found me. None seemed anxious to be the first to dash down that passageway to rout me out of my momentary concealment.

I got my gun around, braced the heel of my hand against the oil-smeared gratings and made ready to take as careful aim as I was allowed at that traitorous rat Art Hislop.

So he had gone over to the mutineers, had he? Why? A dicker arrived at, perhaps before the uprising had occurred? Had he managed somehow to let them come aboard? Had he—

But there was no time to search my mind for reasons. There he was, all palsy-walsy with those murderous ship-lice, and that was all I needed to know.

I shoved my arm out just as they started in a rush down the passageway. But Art Hislop, at the last possible moment, had stepped aside to let one of the sailors lead.

It was a narrow passageway, fenced in on both sides by machinery. They had to come single file, and that was duck soup for me.

I aimed at the leader's belt buckle, fired, and saw the white fabric of his blouse twitch an inch or two above my target. He grabbed at the place where the bullet had slammed home, screamed and dropped as if the whole skeleton had been jerked out of him.

That spilled the two birds behind him and gave me my shot at Art Hislop. Maybe he saw my gun swerve. He swayed to the left like a boxer rolling out from under a punch. And I had missed him.

NOW the whole engineroom was reverberating to the explosions of guns. Part of the sound came from the open skylight on deck, where the fighting was still going strong. Mostly, though, it came from the engineroom itself.

The two guys who had tripped over the wounded man hadn't risen and retreated. Like land crabs they had scuttled on hands and knees to the nearest shield against my bullets. One crawled around behind the main Diesel, his companion ducked into the shelter of the refrigerating engine.

Art Hislop came hurtling through the door. As awkwardly placed as I was I couldn't get a snap shot at him before he had taken a header behind the Diesel.

This was bad. They could come crawling aft behind that big motor and outflank me. When they appeared at the after end of the long engine, I'd have no more protection than a louse has feathers.

The smell of fuel oil was rank there in that compartment. And growing ranker by the minute. Without much interest I realized that one of those ricocheting bullets must have severed an oil line somewhere and raw fuel must be flowing into the bilge.

Good thing this wasn't a gasoline engine, I told myself vaguely. The flame from the roaring guns would set that off.

I watched the after end of the big Diesel, waiting for the first face to peer out from behind it. But I tried to watch the compressor, too. And a white silhouette appeared in the passageway leading forward to the captain's cabin and the crew's quarters.

From behind the Diesel came a running figure, gun leveled at me.

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Two things saved me. I had been waiting for a man to appear there and my own automatic was steady on the spot. And the sailor's foot slipped just an inch or two on the oil-filed grating, destroying his aim.

I threw two bullets into him as he tried desperately to recover his balance. He went over sidewise, his head striking the engine as he fell. The sound was like the dropping of a melon on a hard sidewalk. He must have been dead before he hit the gratings.

But the others were busy now. Art Hislop popped out behind the forward end of the Diesel. The other monkey stuck his arm out around the side of the refrigerator compressor. Something plucked at my left shoulder, but I felt no pain.

The man down the passageway began to shoot steadily, but my generator engine protected me from his shots. The air around me seemed filled with bullets, but part of the sound was caused by those slugs bouncing off things and hitting others. And the roaring of the guns; theirs and —occasionally as I took a quick shot— mine, was like a heavy hammering against my head.

They were coming, now. I couldn't watch three places at once. The lug behind the compressor darted behind a switchboard, but I had been watching for Art Hislop and caught the other fellow's dash out of the corner of my eye. By the time I had swung my gun, I was too late. And Hislop got in a shot at me which practically parted my hair.

I could not retreat back into the owner's passageway now. They would all have a shot or two apiece at me if I attempted it. And they couldn't all miss. Not at that range.

There was a moment of silence. Silence, that is, except for the sounds from the deck above: gun-shots, yells, commands, the slapping of feet against solid teak. And through that silence came Art Hislop's voice, cool, mocking—hating.

"Well, Bat," he called, "say your prayers. I missed you the other night with the knife. But I'm getting you now. All ready?"

So it had been Art Hislop who had tried to slice my throat that night. Art Hislop, who had murdered Timmons and Bucky Bosworth. Art Hislop, who had doublecrossed everybody, including Hoke Scanlon—a scoundrel, all right, but with his own code, devious though it might have been.

Here, I told myself, as I searched for him with eyes which saw everything through a red haze of fury, was the master murderer—and might I keep the breath of life in me until I got my fingers on his windpipe!

I PUSHED myself to my hands and knees, half blind with hatred. I knew I would never get out of this engineroom now. But it didn't really matter. I didn't ask to get out of the engineroom. All I asked for was two or three minutes with Art Hislop, and I would send him down before me.

"Bat!" cried a remembered voice behind me.

It stopped me cold, that voice. It stopped everything cold. Everything, that is, but the rattle of gunfire on the deck above. For a static-filled instant there was no sound at all in the engineroom. It was a moment of electric silence like that between a blinding flash of lightning and the resultant clap of thunder.

I spun around. There in the doorway of the corridor behind me was Linda, young, slim, incredibly lovely to look at. Her dark head was held oddly high, her vivid blue eyes stretched wide with fright. Her arms were rigid at her side and in her right hand was a pistol.

I stared astonished at that pistol. And this was the payoff: in her haste she must have picked up the wrong weapon. She was not carrying an automatic, nor even a revolver. The thick-barreled gun in her hand was the bronze pistol for shooting distress signals into the air!

Art Hislop's voice, still cool, still mocking, but with a new ring of triumph in

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it, cut through the noise from outside.

"Get out of here, darling," he drawled. "We're just getting rid of a nuisance, the boys and I. Wait in the lounge—for me."

That tore it. The way he said, "for me." His tone had the exact inflection as had that of the sailor who had said, "Me, I'll take the dark one."

I went around the generator in a hurry. Instantly a gun exploded from the other end of the room. And another. A bullet went past my face so close I could feel the hot stirring of the air as it passed and clanged against the after bulkhead.

I could see Art Hislop now. He was standing up, partially shielded by the huge Diesel. His gun was in his hand, half-raised. But he wasn't even looking at me as I circled the end of the engine.

He was looking over my shoulder. Looking toward the doorway where but an instant before Linda had stood sharply etched against the darkness beyond.

His face suddenly crumpled, and before I had taken two more steps he threw up his gun arm, as if to protect his face from a fast swing to the chin.

I was almost upon him, now. I forgot I had a gun in my hand. Everything in me craved to take him in my two hands, to tear the arms and legs off him, to pull him to pieces with the strength of my own outraged muscles.

I dived headlong at him. But even while I was going through the air, I had a split-second vision of something white that lanced between us in a blurred and smoking line, like a gargantuan tracer bullet. In all that racket I did not hear the coughing bark of Linda's bronze pistol.

My hurtling body slid under Art Hislop's wavering gun arm. My shoulder crashed into his midriff. We went down with a momentum that carried us halfway across the steel decking to the port bilge.

I was still holding my gun and with the other hand was reaching for his wrist, trying to wrench the automatic out of his right hand. I jabbed my gun against his ribs and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. The thing was empty. I got his right wrist and hung onto it. He was underneath me.

He brought his left knee up, roweling me with savage strength. I rolled my body off his knee.

His left hand slid across my face, clawing fingers feeling for my eyes. They missed.

He tried to jab at my eyes with his thumb. It raked down my cheek, ground its way into my partly-opened mouth, then hooked and tried to tear my left cheek away from my face.

I ground down with my teeth, felt them grate on bone. He screamed, yanked his hand away. I tasted salt blood.

All this in perhaps a dozen seconds, while everything else in the world stood still. Perhaps they were still fighting on deck. I didn't care. Perhaps the other mutineers in this engineroom were trying to shoot me off Art Hislop's squirming body.

They didn't matter. The only thing that mattered at all was that I manage to kill this doublecrossing rat before somebody or something interfered.

I BELIEVE I saw that magnesium flare go off, but I'm not sure. Unless you yourself have lived through moments when your brain seethed with a lust to kill, when your fingers, crooked like hooks, were striving to dig a man's windpipe out of his throat, when you had stripped away all the conventional hull of civilization and become little more than a jungle beast—

If you have never fought like that, you can't possible understand why the explosion of that magnesium flare made no impression whatever upon my mind, and even now registers only faintly in the dim background of memory.

Vaguely I was conscious that the softly-lighted engineroom had suddenly become a place so blindingly illuminated that the incandescent whiteness probed through my eyeballs to the very back of my skull.

The shadows of the Diesel engine and the compressor lay against the bulkhead in mammoth black splotches. But these

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phenomena did not interest me; I did not even wonder why they should be.

I did not connect the distress pistol in Linda's pointing hand with the sudden flare of whiteness. My mind was so sharply attuned to the job of killing Art Hislop that there was no room in it for anything else.

He had somehow rolled over and was on top of me. I didn't have my gun—my empty gun—now and I had no recollection of letting it go out of my right hand.

But I have no trouble remembering being on my back, my left hand holding Hislop's gun wrist straight up and away from me, while with my right hand I hammered up into his convulsed face with short, wicked blows, raking across his eyes, nose and mouth with my bloody knuckles until his flesh became pulpy under my fist and his face became redly puckered like the skin of a ripe tomato.

And he was punching down at me with all the weight of his rangy body. Both of us had ceased to guard. I rolled my face away from his chopping blows as best I could; when I couldn't, I just took it.

Neither of us was using brains. We were fighting just like two alley cats, each trying to kill the other as soon as possible. That is all there was to it.

The white light was now stabbing into my head with its brightness. Seventy-five hundred candlepower confined within the four white-painted walls, and reflected by the bulkheads, would have been intolerable at any other time. It was now only a minor discomfort.

The glare must have spilled out of the skylight above like steam from a boiling pot. As I lay there on my back, smashing up into Hislop's convulsed face, my eyes just happened to sweep past him and focus upon that brightly-lighted skylight overhead.

I got a momentary glimpse of three white and frightened faces peering through the aperture, staring down into this inferno for an instant, then disappearing as if they had been wiped from a blackboard with a wet sponge.

THEN suddenly the color of the light changed. There was a dull sound—*pouff!*—and a gust of hot air slammed across the room like an invisible battering ram.

It rocked me, lying on my back as I was. But it knocked Art Hislop off my body as if he had been struck by a sixteen-inch shell.

And I was still hanging onto his gun hand. It was almost wrenched out of my encircling fingers. But not quite. I held tight. His arm twisted cruelly. And the next instant his gun was lying on the hot deckplates.

I rolled over fast, scooped up his gun in my right hand. He crawled toward me, his battered face a horrible thing to look at. He lunged for my throat with two bloodied hands. They slipped under my chin and closed off my windpipe.

And in that moment of violence I remembered how those same hands had closed off my breath that night he had come into my cabin to cut my throat.

Well, this time it was different. He didn't have a knife. And I had a gun.

It seemed to take hours for me to drag that gun under his throttling arms. That was on account of the schemozzle with the crew on deck when they had accused me of murder—when they had gotten me down and Art Hislop had gone to work on me with his feet.

I was tiring fast. Smoke was getting into my eyes, making my eyeballs feel as if they were being rubbed with hot sandpaper. Dimly I realized that the white glare was now gone, that the color of the illumination was red and that dense clouds of viscous black smoke were rolling along the ceiling and pouring out of the skylight.

Now I had pulled Hislop's gun under his arms and was pushing it patiently against his side, just below the ribs. Without compunction I pulled the trigger twice.

For endless seconds those two shots which had torn through his belly seemed to have no effect upon him. Except, per-

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haps, upon his battered face, which was now dripping blood on the deck plates. His eyes stretched in instantaneous surprise.

Then suddenly his clamping fingers lost their strength. He dug his elbows under him and half raised himself to his hands and knees. A moment later his arms buckled and he flopped on his face. He kicked his feet out twice, then lay still.

A shrill voice—a man's voice in mortal agony—cut into my consciousness.

"Fire! Fire!" it screamed. "*Aaahh,* I'm burning up!"

CHAPTER XXVII

DEATH OF A YACHT

THE scream lifted to a despairing shriek. I pushed myself to my feet. Punch-drunk, I turned and looked in the direction of that awful sound.

The entire starboard side of the engine was a roaring mass of flame, apparently fed from some broken connection to one of the auxiliary engines.

And running out of that inferno was the man who had been hiding behind the refrigerator engine. He must have gotten some of the oil on his once-white uniform, for he was now a human torch, ablaze from head to foot.

He bumped against the big bulk of the Diesel, caromed off and then raced aft through the bulkhead door which led to the guests' quarters in the after end of the ship.

I lifted my gun, took steady aim and fired at his retreating figure. I caught him. He fell almost in front of the door in which Buck Bosworth had been murdered. He lay there, spreading the flames like a firebrand.

Where was Linda? I whirled. There she was. She had been driven away from the after end of the engineroom by the fire, which was racing under the deck plates and under the gratings. She was being cut off on both sides.

So, as a matter of fact, was I, but I didn't realize it at the time. All I knew was that Linda, young and slim and gallant, was there in the center of the flaming compartment, shielding her face against the blistering heat with her arms.

"Bat!" she cried, "Bat, where are you?"

In a moment she knew where I was. I was at her side, slipping my hand under her arm. There was no way now to get aft to the owners' part of the ship.

Because of the heel of the vessel, the leaking fuel oil must have been running sternwards in the bilge, to pile up against the watertight bulkhead at the aft end of the engineroom below the deckplates.

You wouldn't believe how that fire, having once gotten a good start, raced aft. A vast funnel of it roared into that door—the door through which both Linda and I had entered the engineroom. And, what was really important, the door which would, if we could get through it, take us back to the stern where our friends were.

But the flames were already racing down the after passageway. There wasn't a chance to go back that way. There wasn't even a chance to get to the door. And if we didn't move pretty fast we wouldn't be getting out the forward door, either.

Even in that second or two as I stood there in that inferno trying to size up our chances, the heat puckered the skin on my face, began to singe the hair on my head.

I hugged Linda's slight figure to me, trying to protect her from that blasting heat. I rushed her forward to the bulkhead door. Ahead of us was the passageway which led past the pantry, the galley, the officers' quarters and, in the extreme bow, the fo'c'sle. A fine place to go.

But better than being burned to death.

On the other side of the watertight bulkhead I swung the heavy steel door against its gasket and took time to dog it down hard. At least it would delay the pursuing flames for a little while.

Pretty well spent, I turned to Linda Her horror-filled eyes lifted, found mine.

"It—it was my fault!" she whispered.

"What was your fault?" I panted.

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"That fire. I—I didn't notice what gun I picked up on deck. I—well, I didn't even notice until that big white ball of fire went off!"

"That's all that saved me, darling," I said. "You'd have missed him with a regular gun."

"Are you—going to leave him—in there?" she faltered.

"Who—Art?" There was no use beating around the bush. "Sure. I killed him. If you're worried about him, stop it. He murdered Buck Bosworth and the wireless man, Timmons."

She gulped. "I—I know it!"

EVEN with that roaring fire already heating up the thick steel door, even with the shooting and yelling going on above us, that stopped me cold.

"How do you know it?" I demanded.

"I saw him with that knife the first night out. I stopped at his room with a message from Vicky. He said, 'Come in.' He had been opening a package with it—cutting the string. He put the knife in his bureau drawer. He didn't know I saw it, but I did."

There wasn't time for any more. Besides, she had told me all that really mattered. Whatever followed would be only detail, and I wasn't much interested in detail right then. I got a good grip on my gun, slid my left arm around her waist and hurried her forward along the passageway.

At every instant I expected to see a mutineer pop out at us, his gun flaming; but not a one appeared. We bolted into the tiny lobby at the foot of the companionway.

Instinctively I looked down at the deck-plates where only a few days ago there had been a trail of blood leading into the wireless room. It was gone now.

But the effect of it was something that no holystone could remove. Right now it was being removed by fire, by gunpowder, by death.

"Follow me," I told Linda, and shoved her behind me.

I climbed the crew's ladder to the deck, and Linda was close behind me.

Framed and sheltered by the steel hood of the companionway I looked aft and caught my breath. The engineroom skylight was a volcano, vomiting flames and flame-shot smoke high into the enormous night sky.

Over the entire ship was a mighty canopy of ruddy smoke, whose refulgence painted the entire deck a bright pink. Mainmast, mizzen, and all the rigging glowed red. And from that skylight came a roaring which almost drowned out the staccato barking of gunfire.

As I glanced aft I saw the deck, a veneer of teak planking over steel plates, catch fire as if by spontaneous combustion. Men were standing on that deck, prancing back and forth in a macabre sort of war dance as they fired revolvers and automatics in the direction of the stern. The growing flames came rushing at them along the super-heated deck; they turned and rushed forward, toward me.

And then I gave it to them. Bullets were still chasing them from the guns of the defenders aft. Now, unexpectedly, they were met by singing slugs from the bow.

That did it. They couldn't stop running on account of the burning deck. They stampeded.

A tall man in a steward's jacket was in the lead. He swerved, ducked under the main boom and headed for the rail on the starboard side. The others—those who could—followed like a lot of sheep.

But there were those who lay still on that burning deck and did not even move when the flames went to work on them.

The motor lifeboat was lying alongside on the starboard side. I could hear the thumping of the men's feet as they clumped on the floorboards. Only six or eight made it. The rest—where were they? In the engineroom, three of them, or what was left of them by now. On deck some more. One huddled figure there in the shadow of the mainmast.

That accounted for the mutineers.

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I RAN to the starboard rail, lifting my arm to shield my face against the blistering heat from amidships. There they were, the mutineers who were still left, all there in the big lifeboat while someone got the engine started and a man in the bow slashed the painter which secured the boat to a cleat on the *Condor's* deck.

It would have been like shooting sitting birds to fire down at them. I suppose I could have gotten every one of them. But it wasn't in me to do it. I had had a bellyful of killing. As it was a shot came ranging down from the stern—from Hoke Scanlon's gun, probably—and one of the men in the boat screamed, doubled up and pitched down into the floorboards.

The lifeboat's engine roared. Somebody grabbed the tiller, shoved it hard over and the boat sheered away from the *Condor* in a wide circle.

"Oh, Bat," Linda moaned, beside me. "The heat—it hurts!"

It hurt, all right. My clothes burned me where they touched the skin. My face felt blistered. The entire 'midships section was a roaring cauldron of flame.

Now it was spreading with astonishing rapidity. Steam was coming up from the red-hot plates at the water line. The fire was creeping—no, rushing—along the wood-sheathed deck. I could see a distinct sag in the sheer of the deck where, under the terrific heat of the engineroom, the frames had begun to buckle and the steel ceiling to give way.

What, I wondered, was happening to the folks on the quarterdeck who had somehow managed to hold off the repeated charges of the crew while I had been below in the engineroom? Some of them were alive. The ranging shot into the boat proved that.

"Can you swim?" I snapped at Linda, meanwhile shielding her with my body and pushing her farther and farther forward, away from the heat.

"Of course," she said, and let it go at that.

She didn't offer any details, didn't ask any questions. I led her across to the port side, the side away from the departing lifeboat.

"Jump," I ordered.

She kicked off her rubber-soled yachting soles. But she didn't jump. She climbed the rail and took off in as sweet a dive as I ever saw. Then floated down there, waiting. In a moment I had shucked my crumpled, blood-stained coat and was down there beside her.

"Keep clear of the boat," I said, shaking the water out of my eyes. "Come on."

I started aft slowly, but that was silly. No need to wait for her. Hampered as she was by her clinging clothes she shoved off in a neat six-beat crawl and I had to move right along to keep up.

It was something to see, the *Condor,* from the water. Beautiful, yet enough to tear the heart out of one who loves boats. Her hullplates glowed cherry-red amidships and the water was a-boil where it touched her. We cut a big half-circle around her, yet the water was definitely warm.

The flames from the engineroom skylight were now leaping almost as high as the skyscraping mainmast, which was beginning to buckle just below the first set of spreaders. The portholes all along the side, as far aft as the main lounge were now alight with an uneasy pinkish glare.

And it seemed to me that the entire fabric of the lovely yacht was stirring, as if with an unbearable pain, a killing pain, in her vitals.

We were well aft of 'amidships now and cutting in toward the stern, where the two dinghies, with their cargo of a couple of million dollars in gold, swung restlessly in the fitful breeze.

"You all right?" I asked Linda, whose dark wet head, glittering redly in the eerie light, was speeding along close beside me.

"I'm fine," she said, a little breathlessly.

I GLANCED back over my shoulder. If the lifeboat rounded the bow and saw us swimming here we were cold meat. Nothing in this world could have been

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easier than for them to run alongside, haul Linda aboard with a boathook, and then, taking their own time, bash my skull in with the same handy instrument. But there was no sign of the lifeboat.

A shot lanced down from the after deck of the yacht and smacked into the ruddy water scant inches from Linda's head.

"Hey!" I screamed in sudden panic. I surged up to get between Linda's vulnerable head and the yacht. "Stop firing, you popeyed fools!"

Through the humming roar of the flames came Hoke Scanlon's amazed voice.

"It's Bat!"

We came up under the stern. Somebody was already in the leading dinghy, awkwardly trying to step the mast. A woman, her slender silhouette pinkly outlined against the backdrop of sea beyond. Vicky Seymour.

Hoke Scanlon, his white uniform darkly splashed with blood, appeared at the taffrail, his left arm dangling, his right hand holding an automatic.

"Where's Linda?" he called.

"Here," I said, treading water. "Throw us a line. Can you pull her up on deck?"

"No," he replied. "Don't bother to come aboard. We've got to abandon ship right now. Where's Art Hislop? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, I've seen him," I snapped. "He's dead."

Vicky Seymour—I had forgotten, for the moment, that she loved that rat—sat down so suddenly that the loaded dinghy rocked violently and the mast fell against the gunwale with a loud crash.

I swam quickly to the transom and swarmed aboard the small boat. I stepped the mast so it would not crush the thin planking of the dinghy. Vicky was sitting on the midships thward, her elbows on her knees, just staring disconsolately off across the pinkly glowing water.

"A tough break, sister," I said, touching her shoulder as I moved aft.

I grabbed Linda's slim wrist and hauled her into the boat. Then I looked up at the stern of the yacht. I was just in time to see the steel mainmast, glowing bright red, topple overside and fall with a mammoth splash to port.

"Hoke," I called. "Bring a couple of rifles with you in case the lifeboat follows us. Get Mrs. Taver. I'll help her down. Then I'll give you a hand."

He stared quietly down at me for so long I became impatient.

"What's the matter with you?" I snapped. "Let's get out of here. Call Mrs. Taver!"

His voice came clearly to me through the roaring of the oil-fed flames.

"There wouldn't be any use," he said, slowly. "She wouldn't answer. They shot her. She's dead, too."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LOG FOR TOMORROW

NOW, sitting aside and trying to remember things as they occurred, trying to put them down in this log Mrs. Taver wanted written, it seems like an anticlimax, that easy sail to La Guaira.

Oh, there was a little trouble, but nothing like the troubles we had had before.

At first, with the weight of the gold in the dinghy's bilges, together with the weight of the gold in the other dinghy we were towing astern, it was a little difficult to steer, but a rearrangement of the weights fixed that.

Then it developed we had no compass. Was that a doublecross by Hoke Scanlon? I'll never know; he denies it. But first I sailed by the stars. When daybreak came I remembered how steady were the easterly trades, and I sailed with the wind on my left cheek until the great purple mountains of Venezuela began to lift into the southern sky.

Oh, yes. The crew made one more attempt to get the gold. But we had two rifles. They had only revolvers. And long before they got within pistol range, I, with the tiller propped against my right knee, was plopping one rifle bullet after another around them and into their boat.

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It was too easy. I could have killed every last one of them before they had gotten within effective shooting range.

I remember distinctly. Nine shots I used before the bluff white bow of the lifeboat turned, abandoning the chase.

Abandoning also their last hope for a share of the treasure. The treasure in the two dinghies and the treasure under the water, which we will find just as soon as I can go back to look for it.

It is an odd thing, the way your memory jumps around. Mercifully, the details are vague concerning the three days I spent in the dungeon in the old fortress at La Guaira while the spik policemen burned up the cables to Miami.

I don't blame them, at that. In times like those, I didn't blame the branch manager of the Royal Bank of Canada when I marched into his tidy office, sweat- and blood-stained, to ask:

"Would you be interested in buying about two million dollars in gold coin?"

He took two scandalized looks at me and then telephoned for the police.

Queerly enough, it was Linda who got me out. Even in La Guaira, it seemed, they got an occasional North American newspaper and magazine. And when Linda Haywood told them who she was, they practically swooned.

Such are the advantages of being America's Glamour Gal Number One. Believe it or not, she even contrived to get Hoke Scanlon out of the dungeon next to me, and to put him in the clean white bed of a private hospital and, eventually, out of the country with his skin whole.

At that, maybe he could have beaten the infection, and the rap, too, because that monkey was just too tough to die. Some day he'll just dry up and blow away. I wish I knew where he is now. I'd like to drop in on him, have a drink with him, and just talk over old times.

He is somewhere, and up to some devilment; you can count on that. He has probably spent his share of the gold and had a great time doing that. Maybe while Linda and Vicky Seymour and I are salvaging the other half of the treasure of the *Ulvik*, Hoke Scanlon will come alongside with a bunch of unshaven stir-bugs, and they will try to take the treasure away from us.

But that would be all right. Another fight might be good for me. Linda says I am taking on weight where I shouldn't.

NOW and then, waking up in the long watches of the night, I find myself thinking about that sail to La Guaira, with all that money—and all who were left of the afterguard of the blazing *Condor*.

I remember what they told me about the way of Grace Taver's dying.

"This is all my fault," she had told Hoke and Vicky, while Linda and I had been milling around amid the flames of the engineroom. "I knew Art Hislop was a crook. You ought to know it, too, Vicky, for the good of your own soul."

"I do know it," Vicky had replied, never taking her eyes away from the flaming engine hatch. "I've always known it."

"I was going to split the forty thousand dollars with him that I made on the charter of this boat," Grace said.

"Nuts!" Hoke Scanlon snapped at them. "Unless I don't think straight, he murdered Timmons and Bosworth, planning all the time to throw in with the crew when we had found the treasure and get away with the best part of it himself."

"I suppose he did," Vicky Seymour said, her voice dead level. Then her tone lifted. "How is he worse than the rest of you, except in degree? Grace, you gypped us all. You were making forty thousand, win or lose. Captain Scanlon, you were planning to doublecross us all, only you got doublecrossed yourself first. Dog eat dog, that's the way it is and—"

That's the way I heard it from her own lips there in the dinghy as we sailed across a sun-smitten sea toward the coast of Venezuela. Then, apparently, the mutineers came dashing down the deck again.

Grace Taver sighed very deeply. She lumbered to her feet, an aging, hennaed

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woman, who had seen in her time about everything there was to see. There was a fortune in gold floating astern of the *Condor,* and no doubt she remembered that as she straightened up and let her breath run out.

"Well," she said, over her shoulder, "if there's any café society in Hades, I'll have a look at it."

Vicky made a grab at her. But Hoke didn't. Hoke was a realist. Grace stepped clear of the doghouse and, facing forward, let the mutineers have what was left in her gun. Three shots, I think Hoke said. She stopped that particular charge, but the crew returned her fire.

Both Hoke and Vicky heard the bullets hit her. Both told us, there in the placidly sailing dinghy, that she was dead before she hit the deck.

"IT'S just as well," Hoke said, lying on the bottom and looking aft at Linda and me. I guess we looked pretty cosy there in the sternsheets, me with Linda's glossy head on my shoulder as I conned the two dinghies southward.

"After all," Hoke continued, wrenching his eyes away with an effort, "what did she have to live for? Her social racket would stink, on account of the way this thing turned out, and—"

He broke off in a sort of groan. "Hey, have a heart, you two, will you? Is there any need for you to kiss each other while I'm lying here wounded so bad and all?"

I took my mouth away from Linda's sweet lips. After all, we had everything before us, Linda and I. There was no use rubbing it in before Vicky, whose clay idol was now shattered and consumed in the flames, and before Hoke Scanlon, who had in his own way loved Linda, too.

We could afford to wait for the rest of our kisses. And so we sailed on through quiet seas, leaving behind us the tall plume of smoke that was the *Condor* to grow smaller and less significant with each hour. Until, with passing time, it disappeared entirely.

And that is why I am glad enough to finish up this diary, this log Mrs. Taver hired me to write. I have a copy of it. And now and then, if the life of a staid married man ever becomes a little dull; if ever Linda and I, cruising in our new schooner along the Mosquito Coast, should become bored with life, we have only to look back over this, Mrs. Taver's log. And it will bring back to us the sights, the smells, the sounds, of that last nightmare night.

And then, if we have any sense at all, we won't mind the dull routine of conventional life, because we know what adventure in the raw is like. You can have my share, and Linda's too, of adventure.

But I hope some day I'll hear where Hoke Scanlon is. He was a scoundrel, that monkey, and I wouldn't trust him across the room.

But at that, when you were around him, things happened. Whatever else he was, he was a man.

THE END

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 114, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 114, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

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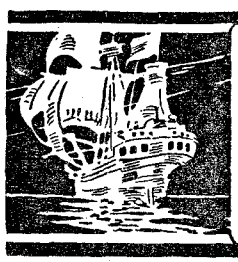

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THREE of this week's contributors have grown up with ARGOSY. One of them, indeed—Mr. Hall—has been reading the magazine for fifty-four years, and we think he deserves a special accolade. After all, ARGOSY is only in its fifty-eighth year, and so Mr. Hall comes very close to being a charter Argonaut.

It's extremely satisfying for us to know that there are people like Mr. Hall around. Very few American magazines can boast of such unshakably loyal readers; but then, very few of them can equal ARGOSY's record in age and quality. We can say that in all modesty, because ARGOSY had her sails full set long before we began to clutter up the decks. But we are heartened to learn that so seasoned a reader as Mr. Hall is apparently still content with the magazine that he has helped to rear.

CHAS. E. HALL

The following may be of interest to you. I will be on my next birthday sixty-nine years of age, and I have taken ARGOSY since I was fifteen years of age.

Fifty-four years—quite a long time. The ARGOSY at that time was about the size of the *Rural New Yorker* which I have been reading for the past forty-six years. Born and raised in the city of New York, I was twenty years a post-office clerk—until 1920 when I accepted a position here as superintendent of the water department.

I am still one of your up-to-date readers. Very resp. and good luck.

EGG HARBOR CITY, NEW JERSEY

HERE are two gentlemen who are Mr. Hall's juniors in ARGOSY experience, but not by very much. For a good many years now they have listened to the plaints of their fellow readers, and finally they have been impelled to send us their own unconditional good will. We receive it gratefully; the following letters, ladies and gentlemen, are the kind we memorize and recite to ourselves in moments of stress.

Our sincere thanks for them.

HAROLD S. FRISBIT

I am not writing to criticize; I am old enough to know better. The fact is I am seventy-five years old and have been reading ARGOSY for something like thirty-five years now. My wife says this writing a letter to a magazine shows I am in my second childhood.

Well, that may be, but I think any man who has enjoyed ARGOSY as long as I have ought to tell the editors about it. Lord knows, they get enough snapping and growling from persons who like to think they are brighter than the authors. Now this is what I want to say. I like ARGOSY, I have liked it for more than thirty years and I expect to go on liking it as long as my eyes hold out.

Of course, I like some kinds of stories better than others. Historical stories are my favorites, and I want to say right now that you may have a second Dumas in that man M. R. Montgomery. "Rakehelly Ride" is the best story I've read in the last year, and I'll put it up against the finest of the old-timers. Maybe I am prejudiced, because I've always enjoyed reading about the time of Richelieu. But you keep that fellow Montgomery hard at work.

These fantastic stories don't get me very excited. Now that is not criticizing, mind you; there seem to be great crowds of people who read nothing but fantastics and I say let 'em have 'em. Personally I am not worried about what is going to happen ten thousand years from now.

Well, I have run on and on and I haven't said anything much. That's what happens when you are in your second childhood, I guess. But you keep ARGOSY the way it is and I'll keep on reading it and so will a lot of other people, if they have got good sense.

NEW HAVEN, CONN.

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HARLAN LEIGHTON

I have read your magazine ever since I can remember. In fact my father had a number of copies of the old Golden ARGOSY which I read but unfortunately did not keep.

I have noticed in the readers' viewpoint several criticisms and also several boosts for your magazine. I feel that you have a magazine surpassed by none and today's ARGOSY is up to your standard set many many years ago, and I doubt if the ones who grumble the most have read nearly as many issues as I have.

Your stories of the Gang in "Children of Tomorrow" and "Bright Flag of Tomorrow" certainly are the equal of anything you have ever published.

I feel that less kicking and more thorough reading of each issue would improve the attitude of the readers who do kick.

Most noticeable is how quickly they pick up slight inaccuracies by the author who studies his subject very carefully before completion.

Give us the same quality as you have for the past years and I am satisfied. For the past ten years I have kept a complete file of each issue and enjoy looking back for comparison at the old stories and get a big kick in reading a good ARGOSY story by an old ARGOSY author.

LISBON CENTER, MAINE

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ROBERT CARSE

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CHARLES GREENE

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—FEBRUARY 10

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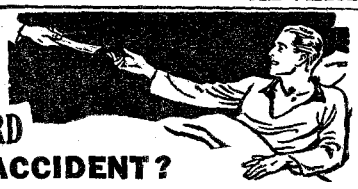

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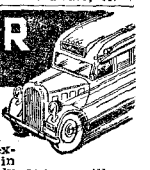

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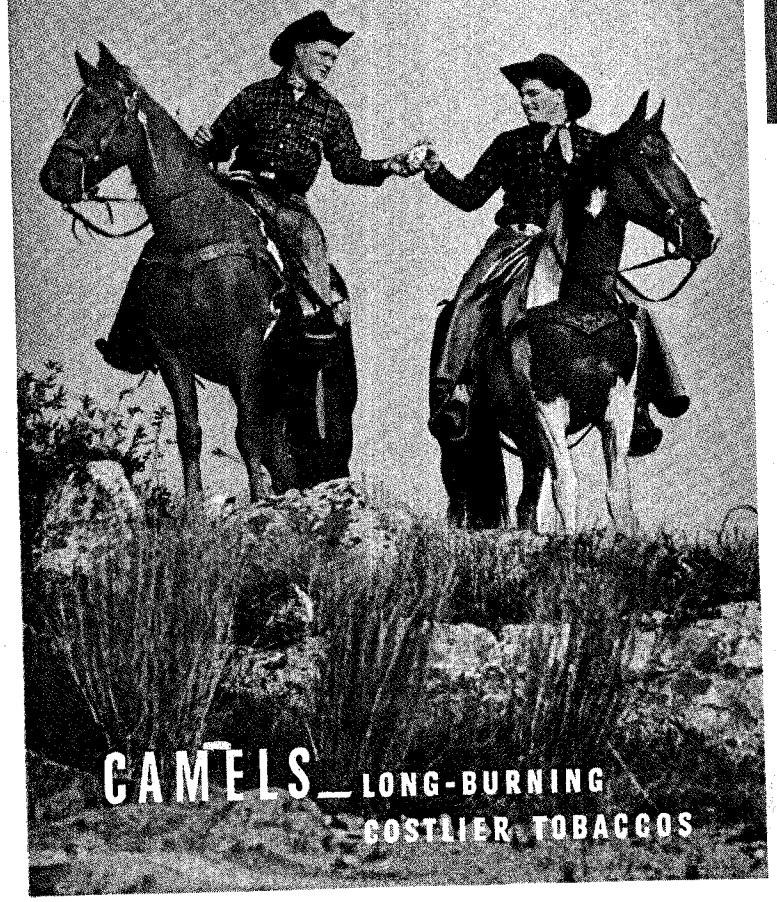

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